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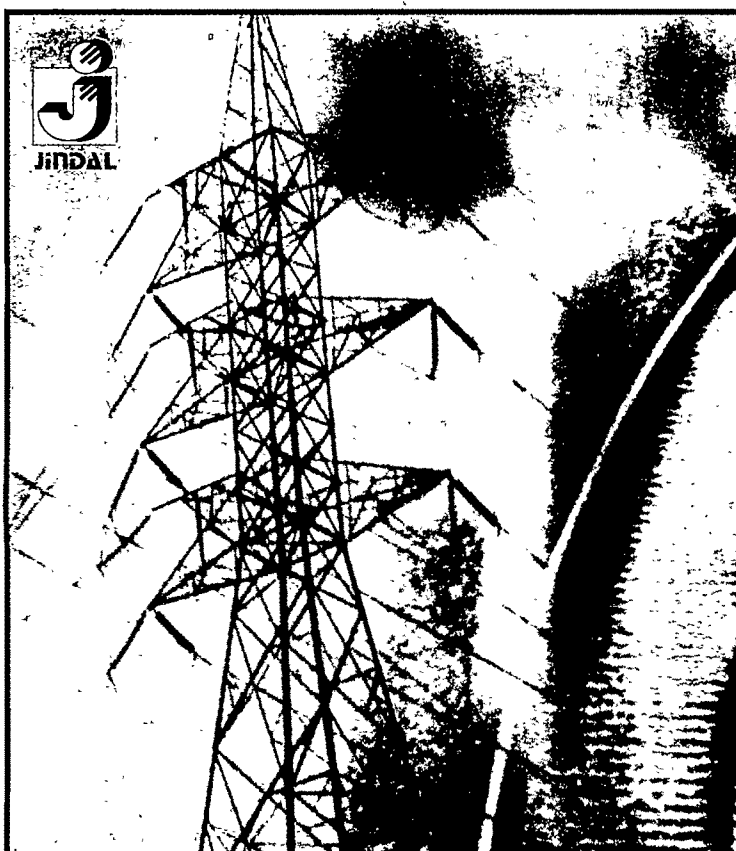
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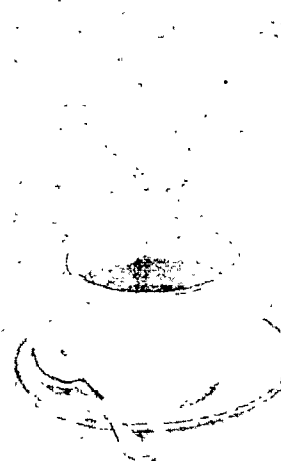
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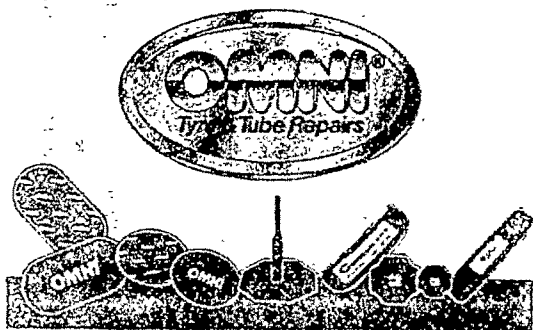
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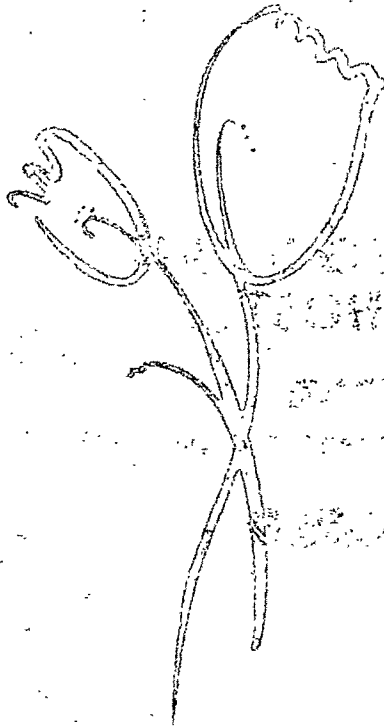
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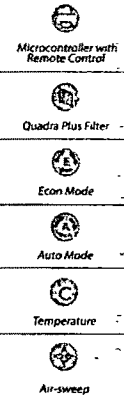
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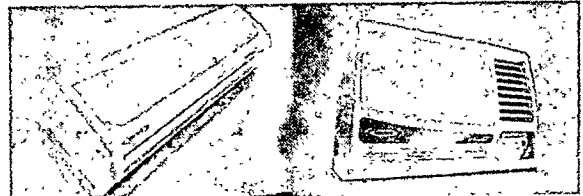
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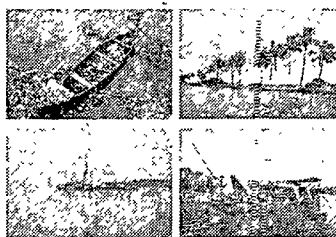


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*Kumarakom, the heart of backwater country.*

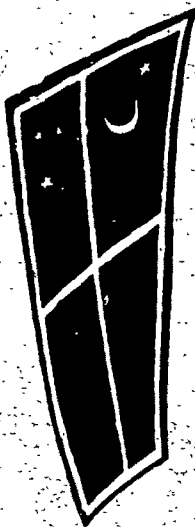
*In a million shades of green, the endless backwaters  
meander. Lilies bloom. Lotuses smile. Children play.  
Coir-women sing. Butterflies dance. Fishes plop.  
Birds dive. Elephants bathe. The wind whispers.  
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Boats sail. Life flows. And suddenly, you're a poet.*



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This is 9 year old Julie.  
She's going to grow up to either be  
a social worker or a sex worker.  
And you're going to decide which.



Take a deep look into Julie's eyes.  
What do you see fifteen years  
from now? The caring eyes  
of a field nurse or the blank eyes  
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little girls. So please,  
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make up your mind, now.

**Nanhi Kali**

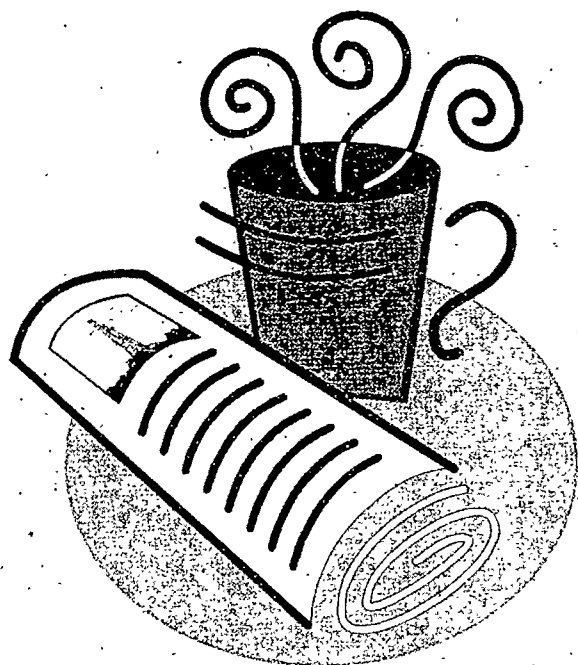
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## Decades of Excellence in Sugar Industry

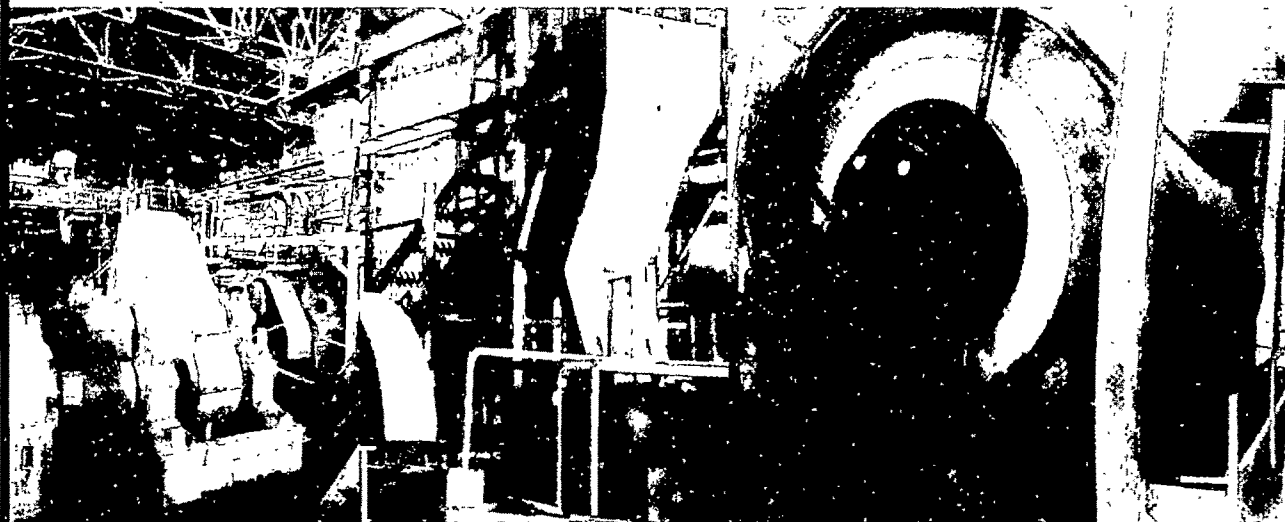
Triveni's eminence in the Sugar Industry is as old as the Indian Sugar Industry. Its 3 sugar mills in Khatauli, Deoband and Ramkola with a combined crushing capacity of 24000 TCD makes it a leading producer of sugar in India.

Its sugar machinery division has set up over 40 Turnkey sugar plants and expanded, modernised or rehabilitated over 25 sugar factories. The division has a creditable list of exports including a Turnkey 3000 TCD plant installation in Indonesia and major expansions in Uganda, Ethiopia and Bangladesh.

Besides the division has a vast installation base of Sugar machinery like Mills, Clarifier, Vacuum filters installed in various sugar mills world over.

The group has impressive manufacturing facilities at Bangalore and Mysore, both of which have ISO 9000 accreditation.

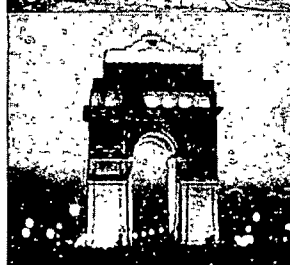
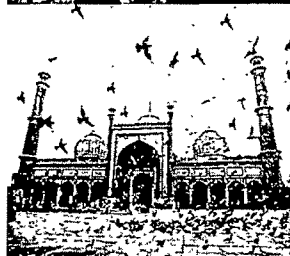
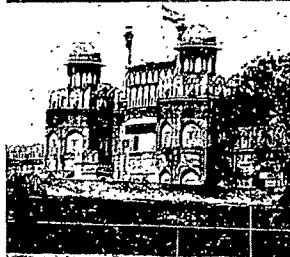
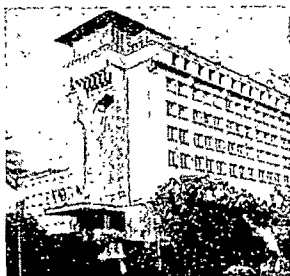
The focus of the group today is to create a niche for itself in high technology areas of sugar Industry for which, it has associated itself in a collaboration with Sugar Research Institute of Australia.



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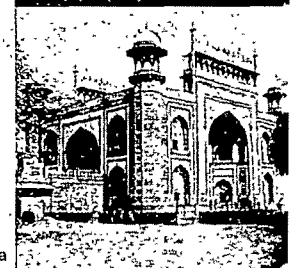
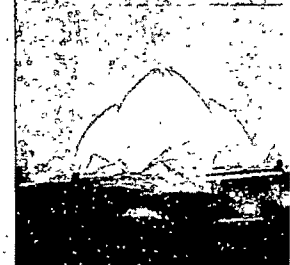
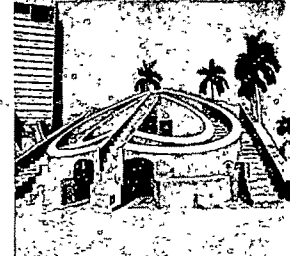
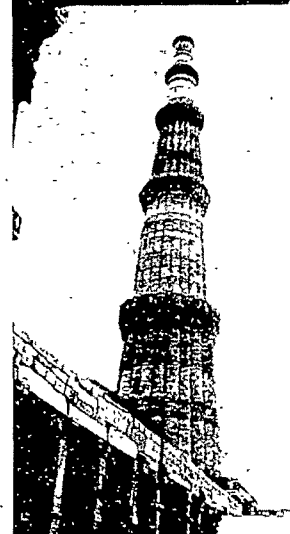
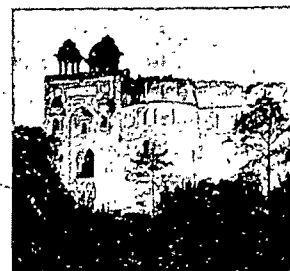
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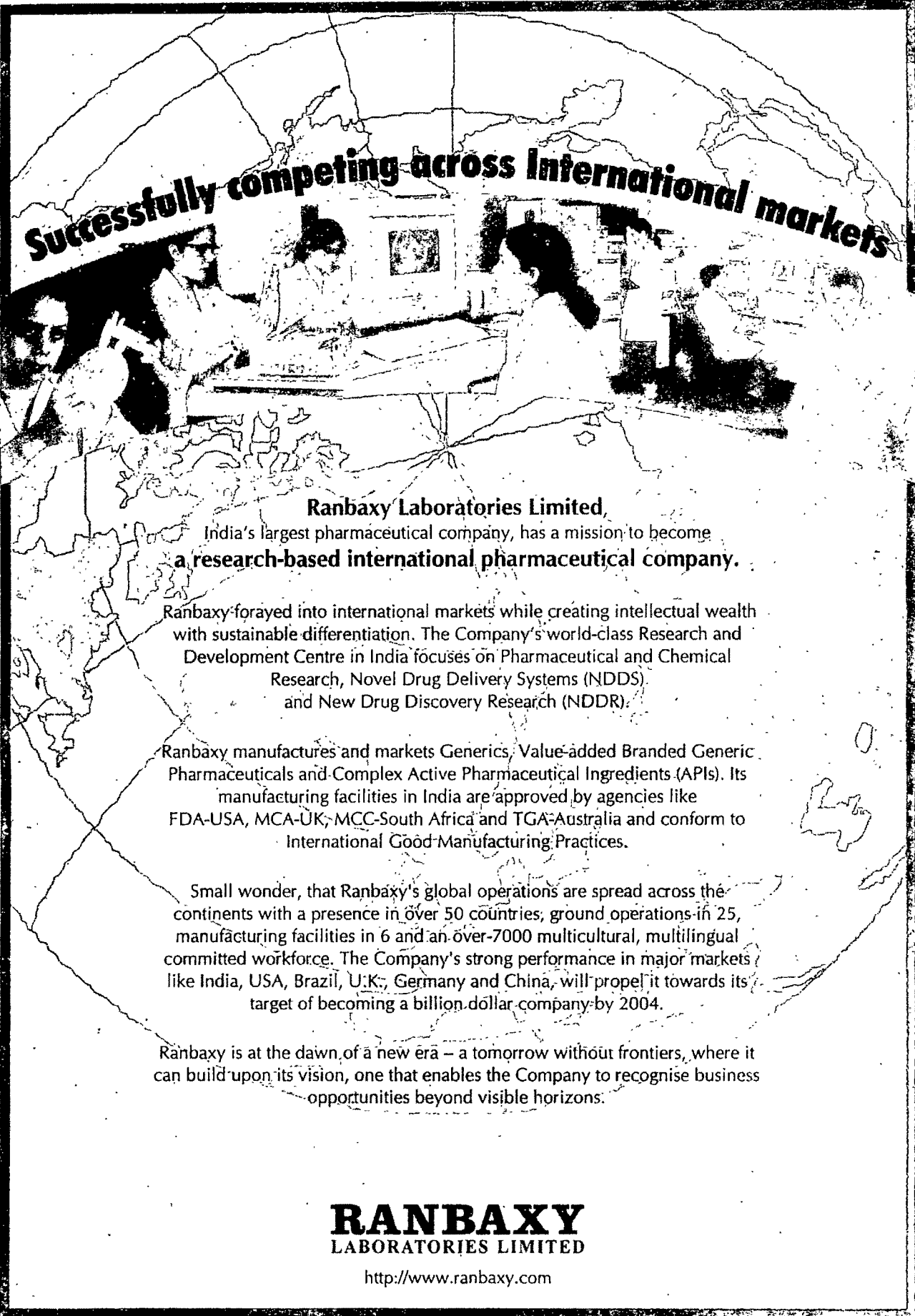
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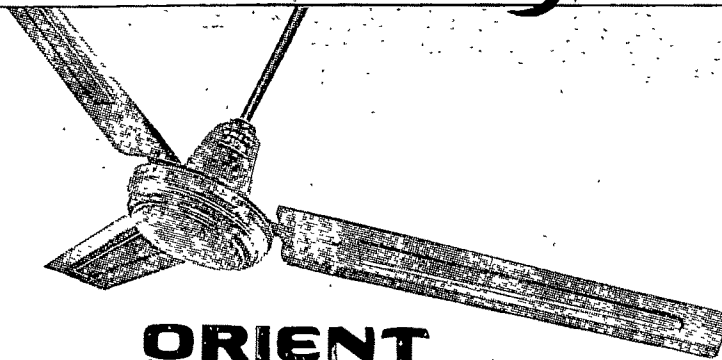
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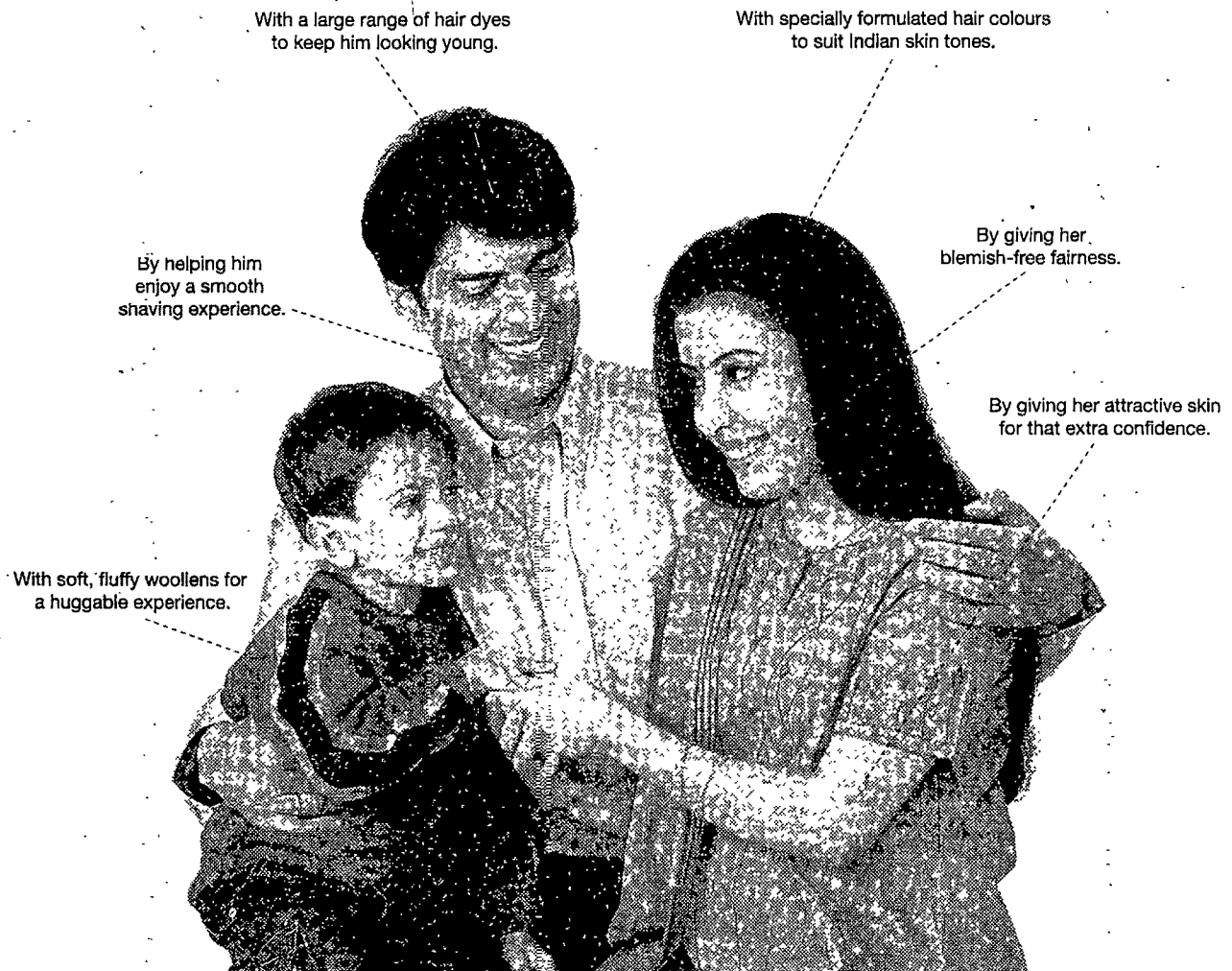
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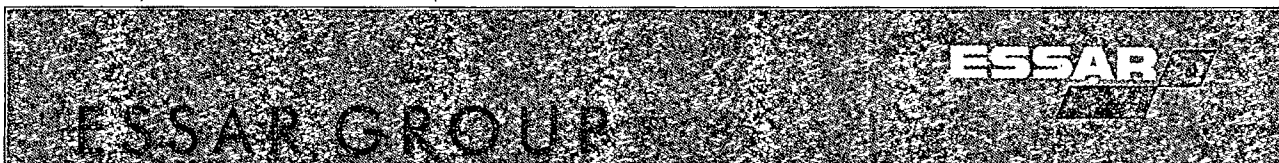
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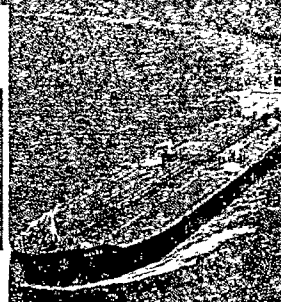




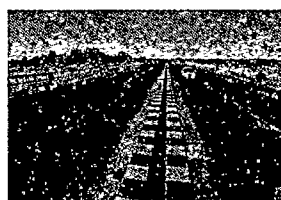
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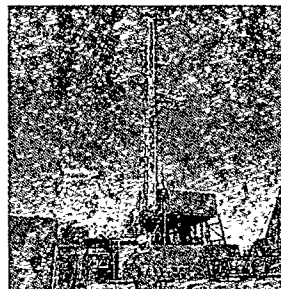
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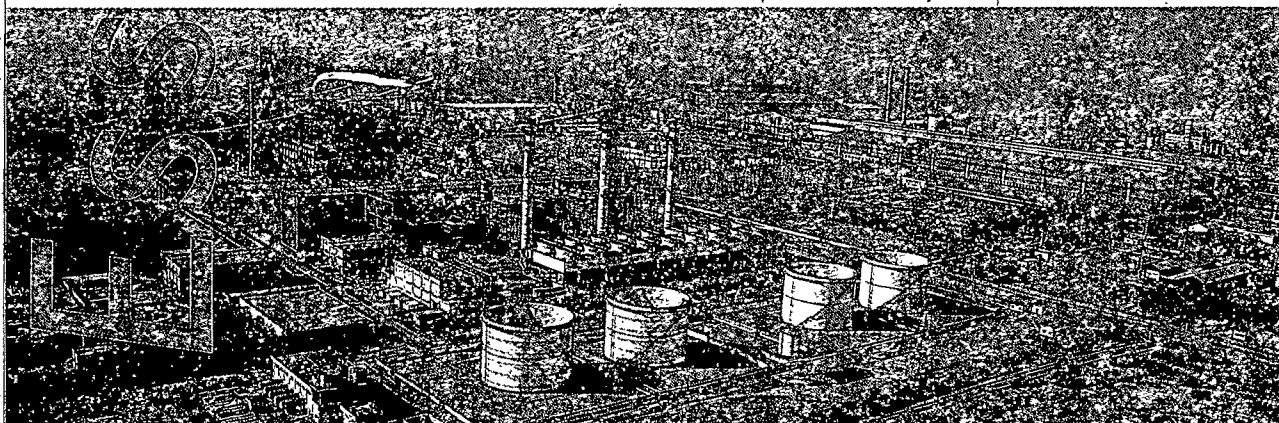


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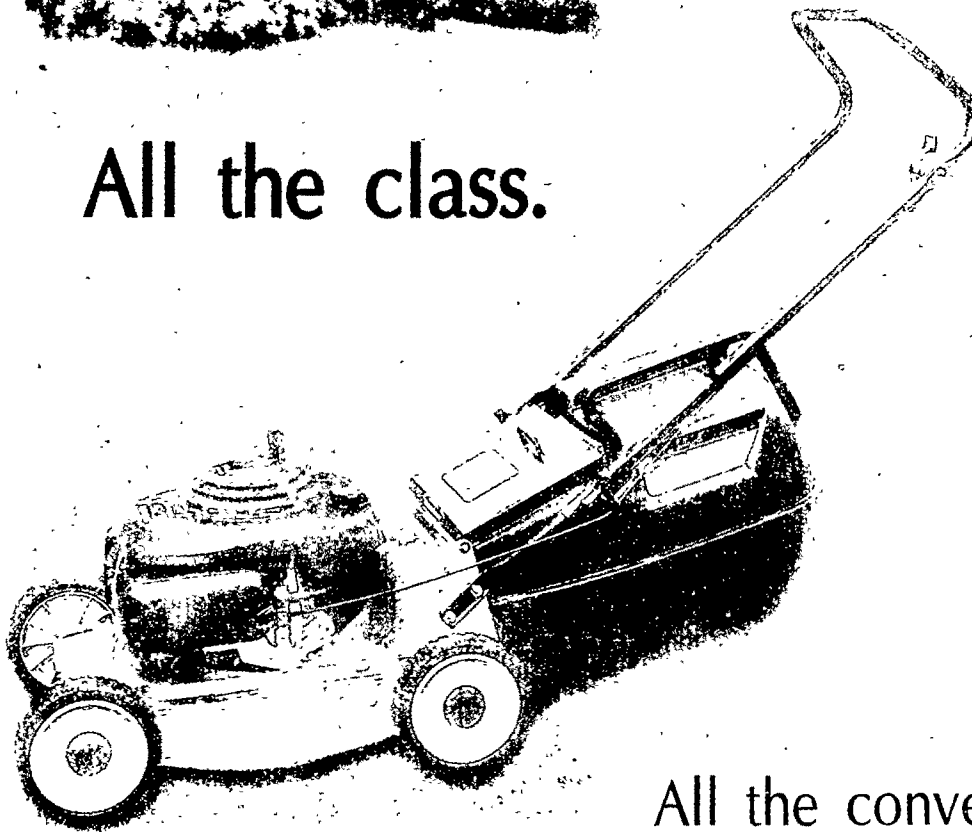


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circulation N.K. PILLAI

46 Malhotra Building, Janpath, New Delhi-110001; Telephone 23316534; Fax 011-23316445; E-mail seminar@vsnl.com  
single copy: Rs 25    Yearly: Rs 250; £ 35; \$ 50    Three year: Rs 700; £ 95; \$ 140    Reproduction of material prohibited unless permitted.

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SEMINAR 521 – January 2003

# 521

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a symposium on

the year that was

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# Recovery time

T. N. NINAN

AFTER two years of gloom the clouds have begun to lift, despite the economy being hit by a twin blast. That we should have a recovery in the face of double adversity is remarkable. For, historically, two events have derailed the Indian economy: high energy prices and a poor monsoon. The last time these two struck in tandem, GDP actually shrank by 5 per cent in 1979-80 and inflation reached record levels. This year, we have had once again a sudden increase in energy prices as well as a drought. The first has caused a substantial increase in the oil import bill, while the second is expected to push down foodgrain production by a precipitous 10 per cent. And, naturally, there is widespread distress in the countryside, while petrol and diesel prices have reached new highs. By all past experience, therefore, we should have been in crisis just now.

Yet the economy is on the rebound, and inflation remains a low, low 3.5 per cent. Although GDP growth is likely to be around the same

level as last year (5.5 per cent), the story in the two years is quite different because last year was a record year for agriculture. And so the mood in all but the drought-hit states (where there is large-scale distress) is decidedly more upbeat now, bringing to an end the gloom that set in when the internet bubble burst and cut short the mini-recovery of 2000.

Look at all the positives that have brought about the change this past year. The stock market has begun a modest rebound after losing value for three years in a row. The manufacturing sector had lost all zing, but is now reporting better numbers, with renewed growth in automobiles, cement, steel and a host of other sectors. Exports have shaken off their stagnation and we now have double-digit growth once again. More jobs were being lost than created, but there is now new life in the job market and pay rises this year will therefore be better than a year ago. Corporate profits have soared in the past half-year,



and software is on the rebound. Even hotel occupancy has registered an improvement in recent weeks.

What few commentators have latched on to so far is the fact that the capital goods industry, which has been in terrible shape because of the lack of investment activity, is suddenly reporting good numbers, while bank credit is showing healthy growth—both significant pointers to an upswing. Although there is no sign yet that the economy will break out of the 5.5 per cent growth band that has characterised the past five years, the signs of a change in tempo are everywhere. And this time round, the recovery is likely to be more broad-based and more sustained than was the case with the last two mini-recoveries, in 1997 and 2000. If the situation is managed well, we could even see the economy getting onto a 6 per cent plus rate of growth, which only three other economies in the world are managing just now.

**W**hat has brought about this change? It can't be any one factor. But among the contributory issues, there is the fact that the manufacturing sector has seen at least a partial shakeout and consolidation, with the losers going out of the market or being taken over. The result is that over-capacity no longer exists on the scale that was there five years ago. Cement is one example of an industry which has seen a fair amount of consolidation. Then, the slump in global commodity prices has ended, giving relief to companies producing steel and paper (to take two examples), and also aluminium producers.

Third, many Indian manufacturing firms have done a great deal of hard work through the last few difficult years: they have cut costs, improved productivity (Tata Steel produces more steel today with 60 per cent of its old workforce), understood the

customer better (ask Bajaj Auto), reworked their financial structures so as to get rid of high-cost debt and emerged stronger and able to compete internationally. TVS Motors has bounced back smartly from being down and out, and so has Tata Engineering. Ballarpur Industries (or Bilt) is not the same paper company that it used to be, and firms like Bharat Forge are now global winners.

**T**here is still more to the recovery story. Software had been on the skids, but is enjoying traction once again. The big companies in the business are now doing better than ever before and gaining in confidence about their own capabilities, while the IT-enabled sector becomes a bigger and bigger story. Some pharmaceutical companies have had notable successes in product development and international market penetration, while new growth is promised in areas like retailing (count the malls being opened in various cities) and entertainment (multiplexes are the new rage).

Interest rates, while still ruling higher than warranted, have dropped steadily to levels low enough to encourage a sustained boom in housing finance—which means lots more home ownership (translated into cement and steel consumption, more work at construction sites, downstream growth in home furnishings, etc). The telecom sector has been fairly sizzling, and insurance is doing well now that the new private players have begun to give the state-owned firms a run for their money. Consumer durables could do better, but spending should revive with the change of tempo in the job market and growing confidence among consumers that the worst phase of corporate downsizing is over and jobs are therefore more secure.

None of this means easy pickings in the market, though. Con-

sumers are increasingly price- and value-conscious, as testified to by Hindustan Lever's troubles. Maruti was able to shake off slackness in the car market only after slashing prices, and the airlines have given travellers never-before deals in order to fill the seats. Competition in telecom continues to grow, and here as well as in other sectors, no winner can rest on his laurels.

No sooner had Hero Honda emerged as the market leader in two-wheelers than Bajaj Auto began playing catch-up, while TVS Motor is hot on the heels of both and gaining ground. Retail finance margins are now wafer thin as the banks hunt for safe lending options, and consumer durables get cheaper all the time. The result is that it has become more difficult to pick out the sustained winners, and therefore investment in shares becomes more difficult to call.

**T**he most heartening change, in the whole melange of upswings, is what one can see taking place in the troubled infrastructure sector. The Indian economy remains severely under provided in this sphere, but change is clearly in the air, and taking place on the ground. Not just with regard to the economic infrastructure of transport systems and power, but also communications and even the urban infrastructure in our blighted metropolises. With telephone connections growing by some 40-50 per cent annually, the telecom revolution has finally arrived, and it is a safe bet that within five years India will move from under 40 million telephones today to 100 million phones and more.

The ambitious national highway project is ahead of schedule, though complaints have surfaced about the quality of work being done, and of poor maintenance on the finished stretches. Ports have seen a radical

improvement in performance in recent years, and some of the privatised ports have achieved efficiency levels comparable to Singapore, Colombo and Jebel Ali. With more privatisation planned, port capacity should increase further, and deliver quicker ship turnaround so that the shipping rates from India become more reasonable and help exporters compete.

**E**ven the power sector is seeing change, in that deterioration has been arrested while one or two states have begun to report improved performance parameters. If the pressure for change can be sustained, in three or four years time the worst of the power problem would be behind us. That leaves the railways (for which a major investment programme is being drawn up) and the airports, whose privatisation has been inordinately delayed. As a snapshot, the infrastructure sector in its totality continues to present a messy picture. But look at it from the perspective of five years ago, and the improvements become obvious.

If the physical infrastructure provides the sinews of the system, the financial sector presents its life blood. And as in the case of infrastructure, while serious problems remain the worst may be over. The banks are now in better shape than perhaps ever before, the Unit Trust problem has been fenced in, and other than the exposure of provident and pension funds to suspect state paper, the situation is now under control. Of course IDBI and IFCI still need fixing, but the new law on bad loans is certain to lead to a lot more loans being repaid, to debt recovery tribunals becoming more effective, and of company promoters realising that they can't have their cake and eat it too. In short, while all loans won't suddenly get repaid, the level of non-performing assets will come down.

One of the abiding failures of the past half century has been in managing India's cities – the result of underpricing urban services, then under-investing in them, and following confused policies with regard to land. But now even the cities are getting a face lift. In the capital, which has become progressively unliveable, half a dozen steps have been taken that are beginning to make a noticeable difference. Polluting industries have been shut down and relocated in new, approved areas on the outer fringes. The public transport system has shifted completely to compressed natural gas (CNG) as fuel, reducing automobile exhaust pollution in substantial measure. More than a dozen flyovers have been built, smoothening traffic flow at key intersections, and more flyovers are under construction.

Power distribution has been privatised, and the two companies that have taken over the business are busy investing for providing a radically improved service. Now a three-phase metro rail service is under construction, which will take a great deal of pressure off the surface transport system, and perhaps persuade people to use cars and scooters less than now. The cumulative impact of all this is that life in the capital is going to be far more bearable than might have seemed possible just two short years ago.

**I**t's not just Delhi, Mumbai too is busy investing in urban infrastructure. It had two initial advantages over Delhi, in that it already had a high-capacity train service and a very good power supply system. But the train service was stretched, and now its capacity is being expanded by over 50 per cent as part of the biggest urban renewal project that the city has seen. Many flyovers built over the past few years have eased the flow of traf-

fic through the main arteries, but even more ambitious traffic plans are now being financed by the World Bank.

It's not difficult to imagine that urban renewal projects on a smaller scale are being launched in other cities as well. In Hyderabad, for instance, roads have been widened, the Hussainsagar lake that separates Hyderabad from Secunderabad has been cleaned up, both power and water supply have improved dramatically, and municipal records (including the city's notoriously unreliable land titles) have been computerised and are easily accessible. Tax collection has been given a filip too, though with how much success is not known.

**S**uch steps are not enough, of course. One-third of Delhi's citizens live in unauthorised developments or on the pavements; that figure is close to half in cities like Mumbai. These are people who do not get access to the basics: clean water, sanitation, electricity, a proper roof over their heads. Given the income levels and the scale of the problem, there is no easy answer. But two things do need to get done: land and dwellings that are frozen because of rigid laws need to get freed so that they come into the market; the increased supply will drop prices and make housing affordable for many more people than is the case now. And second, urban services need to get charged for.

Migration into the cities is encouraged by the fact that people can squat on public land without cost (other than what is paid to the local tout or political fixer), use free electricity because it is stolen off the wires, and free water and sanitation because there are public handpumps and the good earth. While the political system has a vested interest in keeping things this way (think of ward politicians and their need for local vote banks), cities

cannot permanently continue to have half their population free-loading; solutions will have to be found.

One reason why solutions have not been found so far is because of the uniform explanation for poor infrastructure in the country: under investment. And this is primarily on account of not charging proper taxes for the services provided by municipal bodies. In most cities, property taxation, stamp duties and the like are nominally high and therefore designed to encourage evasion, while large sections of the population are protected through a focus on historical costs, thereby preventing open real estate deals. At the same time, power rates have traditionally been lower than cost in Delhi, and water charges so low as to be barely more than collection cost.

Delhi is now wrestling to find a rational way to tax property; and if the effort succeeds then other cities might follow suit. Armed with more revenue, India's big cities could certainly hope to provide better services to the majority. Since India already has the world's largest urban population, and the urbanisation ratio will keep climbing, the management of the big cities will become a steadily greater challenge. That the challenge is now beginning to be met is therefore most encouraging, and constitutes part of the good news at the year end.

In the countryside, the central challenge remains the need to diversify Indian agriculture, and move away from the focus on foodgrains. Per capita grain availability is now more than 200 kg, which is perfectly adequate from a nutrition point of view (a family of five can eat 3 kg of grain daily). With more than 90 per cent of the population reporting that it gets two square meals a day, grain consumption is unlikely to grow at much

faster than the rate of population growth (barely 1.7 per cent).

Indeed, food habits are becoming more diverse as more people move above the poverty line and get beyond subsistence levels. Rapid consumption growth is showing up in fruits and vegetables, sugar and tea, and edible oils. Already, as a consequence, grain accounts for less than half of what constitutes "agriculture and allied activities", since there is also poultry, fisheries, milk production and livestock breeding. It is all these activities that have to be encouraged through the state's support services and through the creation of the required infrastructure (like cold storages and quick access to international markets) so that agriculture can get new momentum.

The problem is that the state continues to focus on the grain economy and also insists on intervening on input and output product prices, clamping down marketing controls and distorting markets while persisting with a procurement model that has simply outlived its utility and become a public liability. There is no reason for the Food Corporation to stock 55 million tonnes of grain when the buffer stock requirement is barely a third of that figure.

The other problem in the countryside is plain governance failure. Teachers don't teach, so that 60 per cent of school students drop out by Class V (this does not get reflected in the literacy numbers because if you can write your name the government considers you literate). Hospitals spread disease rather than cure patients — and cure needs medicines that are usually missing in the public health system. The public distribution system does not function in the needy areas (in Kalahandi and elsewhere, the starving were found to have sold their ration cards!) And when it comes

to law and order, it is the law of the jungle that prevails in large parts of the troubled northern states, while armed insurgency remains a problem in at least half a dozen states.

It is doubly ironic, therefore, that state administrations that fail to deliver the goods while employing whole armies of employees, are now bankrupt. By one count, more than a dozen state governments are unable to pay staff salaries on time, and many have taken on financial liabilities (through the provision of various guarantees, for instance) whose full extent has not been fully reported. The central deficit too remains high, and on a comparable basis is now perhaps higher than when the reform process got under way with the 1991 budget.

While this is debilitating enough (and causing unease to both the IMF and the international rating agencies), it also prevents the government from pursuing counter-cyclical policies, like pumping in investment when private demand is slack. If the privatisation/disinvestment business had continued smoothly, Arun Shourie may well have been able to deliver the promised Rs 80,000 crore over the next five years and in the process eased fiscal pressures substantially. But with skirmishing not yet over on the subject, the finance minister will get little joy from this particular corner.

For all the problems that continue to exist, a watershed has been reached. Many of the most important problems identified 12 years ago have been tackled with varying degrees of success. Even in sectors where a lot of work still remains to be done, the hump has been crossed. Unless the system falls apart, things will now continue to happen in improving the infrastructure, making the manufacturing sector more competitive, diver-

sifying Indian agriculture, privatising unproductive assets in government hands and opening up the system more completely to the world. The only issues where the toughest part of the uphill climb still lies ahead are with regard to plain old governance and fiscal discipline.

**W**hile it is important to keep the eye on those two balls, policy-makers must also begin to look in an altogether new direction. For the novel worry from an unexpected quarter is the result of India's success in software exports. A year or two ago I had in my annual *Seminar* article, considered the possibility that India's software exports would reach a point where India would have more dollars than it could handle. Well, that situation has been reached faster than I had expected. India is already awash in dollars. And this is not because of capital inflows or non-resident Indian remittances (though it is that too, as we will see), but because India now has a surplus on its trade account.

This is such a novel situation that most people simply have not understood what it means. After all, though India began its life as an independent nation with fat dollar and sterling balances, as soon as development spending under the five-year plans got under way the country began running a trade deficit. Other than one freak year in the 1970s, it has been that way for the past 55 years. Indeed, economic theory tells us that this is exactly as it should be: a developing economy is by definition capital scarce and therefore needs to bring in capital by way of equity investment or loans (on commercial or concessional terms), and these are used to finance that part of imports which is not financed by exports. In other words, capital imports finance the trade deficit. But what if there is no trade deficit in the first place?

India's software exports were next to nothing five years ago, and last year totalled over \$8 billion (or 2 per cent of GDP). That was enough to propel India into a trade surplus year (trade being in both goods and services) – the first time in a quarter of a century. It was a small surplus, but one that will now get steadily bigger, as the figures for the first half of the current year (till September) suggest. By next March, the full financial year's exports of software and IT-enabled services will have reached more than \$10 billion, and with fresh momentum in the sector the figure next year is expected to be over \$13 billion, or 3 per cent of GDP, making it India's largest single export item, bigger than the combined total of cotton textiles/garments. And mind you, this didn't exist as a significant item a decade ago. It's like striking oil.

**W**hich is wonderful, except for the fact that the traditional view favours a weak currency for a developing economy – if Rs 50 translates into a dollar instead of \$1.25 (which is what it would be if the exchange rate was Rs 40/dollar), then your exports are cheaper in international markets and you can sell more. Simultaneously, products from overseas become more expensive in domestic markets, so that imports gets squeezed and domestic producers get more elbow room. A weak currency works continuously to feed this encouragement of exports and discouragement of imports, whereas a trade surplus caused by the software export boom changes this calculus and converts what has been a weak currency into a strong currency, because you are now earning more dollars than you are spending.

And that has serious implications for all the other export sectors that depend on a weak currency. Imagi-

ne the plight of those who export tea and cotton and tobacco and sugar and a host of other commodities on which price competitiveness is critical, if the rupee were to keep moving up against the dollar? Software would continue to boom, since it has 30 per cent profit margins, but other sectors with 3 and 5 per cent margins would certainly suffer.

**I**ndian exporters operating on thin margins have been able to bet so far on the certainty that the rupee would lose ground every year, since that has been the historical experience. After all, the rupee slipped from Rs 4.76 to the dollar in 1949-66 to Rs 7.50 and then slid (under the floating rate system) to Rs 18 in 1991 and further to Rs 49 early this year. To a large extent the loss of exchange value reflected the higher inflation rates in India, but it is also true that Manmohan Singh was able to sharply cut tariff protection rates a decade ago by pushing down the rupee vis-à-vis the dollar from Rs 18 to Rs 31 in next to no time, and thus neutralise the impact of the tariff cuts while encouraging more exports.

Readers will recall that Indian exports did suddenly spurt in the mid-1990s in response to these price signals. But if the rupee now becomes a strong currency, then that kind of corrective action is no longer possible. Indeed, India does need to drop its tariff rates further, since they remain the highest in the world. But this time round, the finance minister and the Reserve Bank will not be able to neutralise it by dropping the rupee. So tariff cuts will mean more intense competition from imports, in everything from paper and aluminium and from steel to copper.

Inflation rates in India have over the few years become much lower than the historical average of around

8 per cent; but they remain about two percentage points higher than inflation rates in the advanced economies. Logically, the rupee should continue to drop against the currencies of those countries by about 2 per cent a year, to reflect the differential inflation rates. Instead, the rupee has gained this year against the dollar, and may continue to do so for the foreseeable future.

**I**ndeed, the rupee would have gained much more in value if the Reserve Bank had not countered its rise by mopping up dollars from the market and selling rupees. And it has been forced to do this because the interest rates in India are high, compared to the rest of the world. Overnight money in the US, for instance, fetches around just over 1 per cent (at an annual rate). In India, in contrast, the Reserve Bank offers 5.25 per cent. This would be fine if you knew that the rupee would fall by 4 per cent against the dollar. But if the rupee is rising, then the difference in interest rates is an open invitation to NRIs to borrow in dollars overseas and pump that money into India, and make a killing at virtually no risk. Indeed, NRIs seem to be doing just this and it is this trend, along with the regular flows of portfolio investment as well as foreign direct investment, that has created the strong dollar inflow.

The Reserve Bank has responded by buying up as many dollars as it can, and because this means pumping rupees into the market, the danger is of a runaway growth in money supply, which at some point can provoke greater inflation. To prevent this unwanted side-effect, the RBI has been selling government bonds and taking back the rupees, but there are limits to all this and if the software surge continues, the combined impact of a trade surplus and of capital imports will force the rupee to rise. One solution is to allow Indians to

spend and invest more overseas, so that you encourage the reverse flow of dollars, and to a limited extent this is what the RBI has started doing.

The more substantial solution to the unwanted capital inflow is to drop domestic interest rates. Here the RBI is constrained by the severe political pressures against dropping interest rates on savings instruments like provident funds and post office savings deposits (which offer 9 per cent and more, tax-free as well as risk-free). These rates are clearly unsustainable, and point to the tensions between political impulses and economic logic. Indeed, political pressures also come in the way of the government tackling the subsidy issue and thereby reducing the fiscal deficit.

**S**ubsidies are up 60 per cent in the first half of this year. If these could be cut, and the level of government borrowing (required to finance the deficit) lowered, then the demand-supply balance for money would swing and the RBI would be able to continue pushing interest rates down. But with the high deficit and the high rates of interest on small savings, interest rates in the market remain high and are creating a needless dollar inflow for which there is no immediate solution. The short point is that while software exports are a great success story, they have begun to throw up new challenges to macro-economic policy.

The other solution available to the government is to encourage imports in areas where it would be beneficial to the economy, and the most obvious area would be investment in the country's physical infrastructure. If Jaswant Singh had to focus on any one button to press so that the economic recovery gains momentum, it would be this one. Because it is what the economy needs anyway, because it creates an investment

stimulus that generates fresh downstream demand with lots of forward linkages, and because it necessitates the kind of policy changes that will work to build greater efficiency in the system. And of all the infrastructure areas where attention can be profitably focused, the most important is power generation and distribution. Lenin had a point when he said what he did about electricity.

**T**his does raise questions about policy reform that is required to reduce investment risk, but not much can perhaps be expected on this as the government gets into election mode: more than half a dozen key states go to the polls in under a year, and the general elections are due in 21 months. However compelling the economic logic, no government will want to upset voters at this stage. Since reform in the final analysis is about breaking the egg to make an omelette, the time when no one wants to break any eggs is a time when you should expect little to happen. But to the credit of the Vajpayee government, it has more of an appetite for action at this stage in its life than the Narasimha Rao government had at an equivalent stage in late 1994.

Politics could intervene in other ways too, if civil strife grows or spreads, and makes the economy the handmaiden to politics in new and more debilitating ways. It is equally possible that the government will fail to capitalise on the nascent upswing by failing to make the right policy announcements or bungling on macro-economic management. While it would be prudent to factor both risks into any realistic calculus, it would still be safe to say that the Indian economy looks in better shape today than it has at any stage in the last five or six years. And that is something to be thankful for.

## After Gujarat

HARISH KHARE

BOTH sides of the secular/communal divide were unanimous: The Gujarat elections in mid-December would redefine Indian politics. The outcome is now known, and the Narendra Modi-led Bharatiya Janata Party has registered an impressive electoral sweep, sending the Hindutva forces in a rapture while the secular voices find themselves totally numbed by the extent of the BJP's victory. How does the Indian polity stand changed, if at all, after the Gujarat verdict? Does the Indian state stand re-enforced and re-energized? Do its institutions stand in danger of further losing their effectiveness because of the nature of the Gujarat verdict?

In the tragic and bloody events leading up to the Gujarat poll, Liberal India found itself besieged from an aggressive Hindutva. As far as the votaries and practitioners of aggressive Hindutva were concerned, the Gujarat contest became a modern day equiva-

lent of Mahabharata, a battle of almost epic proportions, pitting the Hindus and their civilizational values against a host of external forces — the international church, the Islamic world and its terrorist outfits — all out to deny Mother India its moment of security and glory. For them, Narendra Modi was the new icon, a He-man who spoke the idiom of masculine Hinduism; and, for them, those who opposed Narendra Modi were anti-Hindu, divisionists and closet sympathizers of the terrorists out to defile our temples.

The Hindutva forces stated their case with extraordinary vehemence and venom; Liberal India found itself forced on the backfoot. The Hindutva forces rejected the suggestion that the Indian state failed to perform its job in the post-Godhra violence in Gujarat. Instead, they asserted that whatever happened after Godhra could not have happened had 'Godhra' not happened. It was a just retribution meted out to

the presumed or actual 'perpetrators' of the Godhra massacre. The underlying assumption was that 'we' know why it happened; we know 'who' did it and 'those' who did it needed to be fixed; and, the ideas, institutions and individuals who stand in the way would have to be got rid of.

It was an open and shut case. The BJP's national leadership, from Atal Behari Vajpayee downward, acted during the Gujarat campaign as if they countenanced the state government's complicity with the rioters. In fact a vote was sought—and given—as a gesture of consecrating Narendra Modi's definition of Indian nationalism.

**T**he new Hindutva stridency was not unfamiliar; what, however, was inexplicable was the failure of the secular voices and political parties to disengage the Gujarat voter from Modi's captivating spell. The Congress offered a clear cut choice between development and dislocation/destruction (*vikas* versus *vinash*); but the voter did not buy the argument. The voter allowed himself to be persuaded of the Modi argument that what was needed over and above everything else was 'security'; good governance, *su-raaj*, employment, jobs, and so on, would have to wait. Security first, security second and security last.

The constitutionally empowered institutional arrangements saw to it that the sieged Muslim minority was not denied its right to a franchise, but their massive participation in the rites of electoral democracy apparently did not help them. It may, perhaps, have rendered them more vulnerable than before. Ironically enough, the Hindus, at least its Hindutva champions, feel that Gujarat does not end in Gujarat. The message and experiment must be replicated elsewhere.

Beyond all this Hindutva passion and the communal poison lies the

larger crisis of the Indian state and the kind of nationalism that has been manufactured to sustain that state order. The state-led nationalism that served India well for the first 50 years after independence seems to have run its course or, at least, is no longer sufficient to garner the requisite legitimacy and efficacy, especially in an uncertain world and an unfriendly geostrategic neighbourhood. As Rajni Kothari notes: 'The new kind of majoritarianism vis-a-vis the minorities not only highlights the sense of humiliation felt by the minorities, but also by the members of the majority community. Critical to this current phase as signified by Gujarat is the fact that the majority itself feels isolated, exploited and humiliated today.'<sup>1</sup> All this despite a government of 24-carat *deshbhakts* at the Centre for over four years.

This crisis of faith, as it were, has been in the making for years and is mostly of the Hindutva votaries's own making. The crisis is centred around three overlapping layers of frustrations: (i) against globalization, (ii) against jehadi Islam, and (iii) with the Vajpayee-led BJP as the chosen instrument to ward off the challenge of globalization and jehadi Islam. The crisis has been getting cumulatively aggravated. The post-Godhra violence and then the Modi campaign of consecration by blood are to be seen as ways of coping with the political and psychological consequences of that crisis of faith.

**O**ne of the major elements in the BJP definition of Indian nationalism was an implicit preference for swadeshi and rejection of 'globalization'. For the RSS, the opposition to 'globalization' was more than an eco-

nomic argument; it was an exercise in generating a new national self-awareness. Beginning with a resolution in March 1992, the RSS Pratinidhi Sabha launched a 'swadeshi campaign' from which the BJP was never formally allowed to distance itself, even after coming to power at the Centre.

**T**he purpose of the RSS campaign was to promote 'swadeshi chetna' against the seemingly inexorable march of 'homogenizing' globalization. Be it the multinational corporation, the foreign investor or the foreign banker—all were outsiders, polluting the purity of Mother India. Swadeshi was a nation-building philosophy: 'The vision of motherland as divine being, conception of nationalism as spiritual force and the idea of patriotism as a creed found concreted expression in the form of swadeshi ideal.'<sup>2</sup>

The BJP accepted the philosophy behind the rejection of globalization and its policy-twin, liberalization. The last major economic resolution adopted by its national executive in July 1997, before the BJP formed a government at the Centre, had talked of 'the false slogan of globalization, the fatal attraction of unrestrained consumerism, the aping of the West, the concern for the comfort of the few at the cost of the vast millions, the lurking dangers to our cultural values and the emerging threat to our sovereignty.'

The BJP was offering to overturn the then prevalent mix of economic policies and political impulses, a mix that the nationalist constituency believed had enfeebled the Indian state and its capacity to protect our

1. Rajni Kothari, 'Culture of Communalism in Gujarat', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 30 November 2002.

2. For a brilliant but sympathetic dissection of the sangh parivar's ambivalence towards globalization, see Dev Dutt, WTO: A New Challenge for Swadeshi Swaraj. Pragya Sansthan, New Delhi, August 2002.



abiding national interests. The nationalist constituency was invited to cast its lot with a *parivar* teeming with deshbhakts, with the promise that the deshbhakts would ipso facto resolve the looming crisis of Indian state-led nationalism. And then, when the Vajpayee era began, the sangh parivar and its super-patriots discovered that they were not at liberty to break the liberalization-globalization paradigm.

**F**or a few years everybody pretended that the deshbhakti of a government of deshbhakts was in itself sufficient to guard Mother India against the foreigner and his unfriendly designs and intentions. But the fiction could not outrun the fact; hence, the current controversy over disinvestment. Early July this year, the RSS mouthpiece, *Organizer*, editorially warned against the mad rush of disinvestment: 'The message is loud and clear – core sectors of the economy, with a social cause and sovereign concerns, need to be under state control. As we are entering the phase of privatization and opening up our economy to foreign investment, it is scary to think of more Enrons and WorldComs waiting to happen due to "systemic" failures in a distant land, over which we have no control. It is all the more essential for us to tighten our own rules and regulations and refrain from a mad rush.'

What for the last two years was deemed to be the loony obsession of the Swadeshi Jagran Manch has now become the concern of the mainstream in the sangh parivar; from the RSS chief to the deputy prime minister to ministers and minions, all are willing to voice their reservations about liberalization/globalization. Some of the opposition is political, some can be described as an economist's dissent; but the larger impulse is of nationalist nervousness. The Vajpayee regime is

increasingly being viewed as unwilling and unable to stand up to the foreigner and his rapacious demands. The nationalist's faith is shaken.

**I**f the foreign investor has mocked our pretensions of collective self-respect, the terrorist has been tucking at our nationalist manhood. Within months of giving the deshbhakts a 'Kargil Vijay' mandate, the nationalist constituency watched in horror the foreign minister of India escorting terrorists to Kandhar in the last week of December 1999. From that jolt to our national pride to the terrorist attack on 13 December 2001, the nationalists have experienced one frustration after another. The Indian state and its nationalist overseers 'helped' the nation cope with the situation by externalizing the threat; they promised to teach Pakistan a lesson, held out threats of retribution against Islamabad. After the December 13 attack on Parliament House, the country was promised a full-scale confrontation with Pakistan to 'settle the issue', once for all.

Our nationalist juices were flowing once again. The 2 June 2002 issue of *Organiser* announced: 'Weighing options: Redraw LoC, liberate Sind, destroy nuclear capability.' The following week, it was: 'Inching towards a decisive war on terrorism.' There was an unstated belief that the international community was, for once, prepared, especially after September 11, to let us sort out Pakistan. The refrain was: 'We do not need America's permission to defend our nation. What we need is courage to act.' For weeks and months the nationalist constituency eagerly awaited the super-patriots to put their money where their mouth was.

Frustration piled upon frustration and a sense of collective let-down set in as the Advanis and the Vajpayees kept mimicking the idiom of 'jehadi

Islam', exhibiting its murderous wares in New York, Bali, Moscow or Akshardham. Week after week the television brought into the living rooms images of commandos, terrorists, encounters; the more our deshbhakts talked of global dimensions of jehadi Islam, the greater were the frustrations over the Indian state's inability to do something efficacious about this challenge to our nationalist manhood. And salt got rubbed into our wounded manhood when the Vajpayee regime had to give in to international pressure and agree to 'relocate' the Indian Army from forward positions on the border. The much promised 'confrontation' never took place.

**A**dded to these frustrations over the Indian state's inability to ward off perceived external threats and challenges on economic and security fronts, was a series of political setbacks to the BJP and its allies. There was no joy as state after state voted for non-BJP governments; in Uttar Pradesh, the party had to break political bread with Mayawati. Unable to do anything to the external sources of threat, the anger and ire turned on the domestic foes.

Even the elevation of Lal Krishna Advani to deputy prime minister did not add to the efficacy; neither the foreign investor nor the terrorist nor the internal critic seemed awed by L.K. Advani's new designation. If anything, the decision-making arrangement got burdened with one more layer of hierarchy, thereby diluting whatever little coherence and purposefulness there was. The nationalist cup of frustration brimmed over with the Jammu and Kashmir assembly results: even the Jammu voter was not sufficiently impressed to favour the RSS-sponsored Jammu Rajya Manch and its agenda of regional/religious separatism.<sup>3</sup>



The nationalist sense of impotence was total. It was in this dispirited context that Narendra Modi made his appearance as the alternative role model of leadership that would rescue the besieged Mother India from its enemies. Since Godhra, he has finessed a liturgy of hate and divisiveness that seems to have touched a chord in the nationalist heart. Media, Marxists, Macaulayites, Mandalites are enemies who must be shown their place; any institutional speedbreakers like the National Human Rights Commission or the Central Election Commission or the judiciary have to be undermined. And, then, use the coercive and legal authority of the state governments to show minorities their place.<sup>4</sup>

**N**arendra Modi has presented an antithesis of the Vajpayee model; by notching up an unambiguous electoral success for the BJP in Gujarat, he has tempted the RSS, the VHP, the Bajrang Dal and other stakeholders in the nationalist constituency. On the face of it, it would be difficult to replicate the Gujarat experiment in other parts of the country; the National Democratic Alliance partners would have to assess and evaluate for themselves the replicability of Gujarat as

a short-term solution to the crisis of failed expectations.

Narendra Modi has offered a way out of this paralysis and impotence by presenting a new interpretation of the Indian state-led nationalism by redrawing categories, 'us' versus 'them', the key operational ingredients in any values, ideas and expectations that are collectively known as nationalism. The Modi catechism is based on invoking fears of 'insiders' against 'outsiders', offering 'insiders' protection against the 'outsiders'. The slogan was: BJP – our guardian. The aggressive Hindutva campaign of the BJP/VHP used code words and slogans to define the 'them' category: 'Mian Musharraf', 'Italian Sonia', terrorists, Muslims, and the Church – all on the same side of the divide, all having a convergent agenda, all out to deny Mother India its tryst with destiny.

**I**rrrespective of Modi's electoral success and the temptation to replicate the model elsewhere, it is not so obvious that the crisis of the ineffectivity of the Indian state would ipso facto stand resolved. The much-touted Commission for the Review of the Working of the Constitution was expected to reinvent the institutional arrangements of the Indian state; even that exercise failed to provide a radically different model of governance.

tion of violent acts by terrorists was more for record and certainly not borne out of conviction. When the body of the terrorist Azam who died in an encounter on 22 November was brought to his house, the MIM and Congress legislators rushed to the place and made provocative speeches. The funeral procession turned violent at Madannapet and attacked the police. A defiant mob offered namaz near the house of the slain terrorist. The speech delivered by Salahuddin Owaisi, supremo of MIM, in Mecca Masjid on 29 November 2002 clearly indicates that the MIM has now come out openly in support of jehadi terrorists. This means more trouble' (*BJP Today*, 16-31 December 2002).

The Modi model of Indian nationalism does not have the capacity to enhance the capabilities of the instruments of the Indian state, either against the marauding international investor/banker or against the gun-toting terrorist. The Modi model can only aggravate the crisis of acceptability and eventually of legitimacy, because it seeks to cast the Muslims in an antagonistic role, as prisoners of clerics rather than equal citizens, owing and rendering equal allegiance to the Indian state. The new grammar of foreigner versus insider holds the Muslims responsible and accountable for every terrorist act, committed by this or that 'module', inspired and financed from Islamabad.

The Gujarat verdict has shown how easy it is becoming for Pakistan to calibrate and influence our internal affairs. Maybe some ISI strategist is having a good laugh after the Gujarat vote. The Modi formula is the easiest and surest way to ground the Indian state in a protracted and unwinnable war at home.

**T**he crisis of Indian nationalism, arising out of what Rajni Kothari has called the perceived 'humiliation' of the Hindus, is now sought to be sorted out by renegotiating power equations to the permanent disadvantage of the minorities. This means turning our back on the successful arrangement whereby 'the interests of the powerful in the society have been served without fully excluding the weaker groups.'<sup>5</sup> This new passion for exclusion and subordination would only kick-in a long term legitimacy overload for the India state, depriving it of that collective synergy and purpose which is a *sine qua non* for any effective state order.

3. Even before December 13/Akshardham, 'ideologues' like Arun Shourie were lamenting 'political correctness' that had 'disabled the ruling groups' in meeting the challenge of the terrorist who 'sees himself as an instrument – of history in Marxism-Leninism, of the Will of Allah in Islam.' Lecture at the Institute of Conflict Management, 21 August 2001.

4. The Modi mindset is not confined to Gujarat. For example. On November 22/23, 2002 the police gunned down Mohammed Azam and Mohammed Imran in Hyderabad. The police claimed that the two were Lashkar-e-Toiba operatives. There was violence after the funeral. This is how Professor S.V. Seshagiri Rao, vice-president of the Andhra BJP analyzed the implication of that incident: 'The Majlis-e-Ittehadul Muslimeen's (MIM) condemna-

5. Atul Kohli, *The Success of India's Democracy*, Cambridge University Press, 2001.

# Congress in crisis

MAHESH RANGARAJAN

THE assembly election results in Gujarat in December 2002 served notice of the continuing crisis for the country's premier opposition party. It was more than a crisis of confidence or one born of a lack of direction. The problem lay deeper still, even if its leaders failed to acknowledge the sum and substance of it. The party that once dominated national politics and defined the agenda in the public sphere is not quite sure about who or what it represents. Let alone finding a way to get back to power in New Delhi after eight long years in exile, it has yet to outline a road map for revival.

The indices of success can be flattering, but they can also mislead quite as easily. The core assumption of the party, as manifest in its two con-

claves at Guwahati and later at Mt. Abu, was transparent enough. The record in office would impress Indians that the party governed best. In 1996, when ousted from power, it ruled only four states; it is now in office in as many as 14. In two (Bihar, Jammu and Kashmir), it is a member of multiparty coalitions led by a regional party. In two others (Kerala and Maharashtra) a Congressman leads a multiparty alliance. It is also the governing party in two union territories. The states where it is in power would serve as a launching pad for coming to power in the rest of the country and later at the Centre.

The Congress under Sonia Gandhi also enjoys closer and better relations with the two left parties than at

any time since Indira Gandhi's leftward turn in 1969. Even Gujarat's campaign had a silver lining in the presence of two veteran socialists on the party's side: Ram Vilas Paswan and Laloo Prasad Yadav. In UP, a Samajwadi Party eager to topple the BSP-BJP coalition ministry courted the party. All roads it seems, do lead to the Congress. It may be out of power, but is very much a player on the national scene.

Such a view ignores that the same party has now lost two or more assembly elections in as many as eight states. The string of defeats has made it virtually a permanent opposition force in Tamil Nadu since 1967, and West Bengal since 1977. It was voted out of office in Uttar Pradesh in 1989 and Bihar the following year, though it is a junior, secondary partner in the latter with Laloo Prasad Yadav's Rashtriya Janata Dal.

The Congress last won an assembly election in Gujarat in 1985, and has lost the last two rounds of provincial polls in Haryana. Sikkim saw the advent of Pawan Kumar Chamling's Sikkim Democratic Front in 1994 which has ruled the state ever since. Andhra Pradesh, a state that loyally stood by the party when Indira Gandhi was voted out across North India, slipped out of the party's hands the same year. To these may be added the case of Goa, where the party won a majority two years ago, suffered a split, was replaced by a BJP-led ministry and then lost a snap poll.

The political map of India thus has a curious anomaly from the Congress point of view: It is not a commanding presence in the Gangetic basin from Diamond Harbour in the East to the borders of Punjab in the North. The South too has only two states with a recent history of Congress rule, Karnataka and Kerala. In

only one state, united Madhya Pradesh (in 1998), has it defied the tide against incumbent governments and been voted back to power. The Congress still plays a key role in politics but its centrality depends on the part of the country one is dealing with.

There also seems little likelihood of reversing the dissolution of its social base in the two key North Indian states of UP and Bihar. To add to this, its stable alliance with the AIADMK in the Indira and Rajiv era has given way to one of deep mutual suspicion. The party broke up in both West Bengal and Maharashtra in 1998-99. Its spread across the country is thinner than the BJP's, but enough to preclude tying up with regional parties like the Telugu Desam Party which are its local adversaries.

The states where it has lost two or more assembly elections in a row account for 278 seats out of 543 in the Lok Sabha. It is also apposite to recall that the party last secured a majority in the House of the People as long ago as 1984 under the leadership of Rajiv Gandhi. The next Congress government of P.V. Narasimha Rao (1991-96) did complete its full term and will be remembered among other things for unleashing economic reform. But Rao could not secure for the party a majority at the hustings, and actually helped it to arrive at the magic mark of 272 by a policy of 'mergers and acquisitions'. The party briefly supported the United Front but in the space of three years (1996 to 1999), it helped pull down two United Front ministries — of H.D. Deve Gowda and I.K. Gujral. This finally enabled Atal Bihari Vajpayee to put together a post-poll alliance till he was voted out of office in April 1999. The Congress gained little except to end up with an even smaller tally of seats in the Lok Sabha.

Yet, 1989 is perhaps a more significant milestone in the evolution of the party than 1996. The latter ended the era of Congress rule in New Delhi, but the former marked the creation of a new political landscape where no one party could corner power. Deals would have to be struck in order to come to power or to hold on to office. These would involve a measure of post-poll flexibility as well as deft manoeuvring for positions of advantage. The Congress showed it was up to the task under Narasimha Rao. But such tactical gains were bereft of any larger strategic vision aimed at reviving the sagging fortunes of the party.

India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, still the longest serving head of government, once wrote that, 'Where there is no vision, the people perish.' He might have added, so does a political party. Nehru's Congress was still a great battleground of ideas and ideologies. Even if the outcomes were often fuzzy, there was a minimal programme and an outlook that bound together the members of the party. This allowed space for strong regional leaders who posed no direct challenge to the premier all-India figure but had distinctive styles and preferences of their own.

The pendulum was set to swing the other way by the twilight of the Nehru era, when the Kamaraj Plan was brought into force to clip the wings of those with vaulting ambitions who might destabilise the party hierarchy. But the Nehru period was already drawing to a close before his death in May 1964. The collective leadership of the Congress settled first on Lal Bahadur Shastri and then on Indira Gandhi as successors to the mantle.

In the period between 1969 and 1972, Indira Gandhi substantially

remade the party. The rout of the Congress in seven states in 1967 and the reduction of the party to a majority of only 283 in a House of 520 were the signal for a bitter battle. The struggle was one between the new prime minister and the Syndicate, the latter mainly resting on an older, regionally rooted set of leaders. The Congress split of 1969 and the polarisation on 'left-right lines' eventually culminated in historic victories for Indira Gandhi's party, first in the Lok Sabha polls of 1971 and then in the state assembly elections after the war to liberate Bangladesh.

**E**ach of Indira Gandhi's great election victories was marked by a search for a unifying campaign theme. In 1971, it was *garibi hatao* or banish poverty. This was her fitting reply to critics and adversaries who sought to personalise the issue with 'Indira hatao' or Remove Indira. The route in 1977 was followed by a successful bid for power in 1980 for a 'government that works'. Four years later, her assassination provided the theme '*Indira ji ki antim iccha, boond boond se desh ki raksha*'. Indira's last wish, her party intoned, was to serve the nation to the last drop of blood.

That was the last time the party won a majority. It was the last time a single party won a clear 51% of the seats in the Lok Sabha. Since then the Indian polity has been much more fragmented and riven on lines of region, caste and community to enable any leader to aspire to such nationwide appeal. India, despite Congress President Dev Kant Barooah's claim in 1976, was never reducible to Indira. But it was at least possible for an acolyte to think on such lines in her heyday. Even the hefty 48% vote share of the Congress in 1984 and the subsequent state assembly elections were her parting gift rather than the work of her successors.

Rajiv started with a landslide win and could only head down. Unlike his mother whose political engagement dated back to her days in Anand Bhavan and the *vanar sena*, the Labour Club in the UK and tongue lashing South Africans of Indian origin for staying aloof from blacks, he lacked a background in politics. None of this prevented Indira from permanently damaging her relationship with the liberal intelligentsia with the imposition of the Emergency. Rajiv went a step further. He failed to anticipate either the dissolution of the social base of the party in North India or to prepare for the rise of a more strident and assertive politics of ethnic assertion, principally in the form of Hindutva but also of caste-based parties in the Hindi belt. In many ways he even facilitated and sought to ride with the former, a strategy that eventually failed to yield dividends.

**T**hat phase did not end with Rajiv's tragic death in May 1991 at the hands of a suicide squad of Eelam Tamil militants. What began with the *shilanyas* of November 1989 culminated in the demolition of the Babri Masjid in December 1992 under another Congress prime minister. Over the last decade, the Congress has yielded both the space for advocacy of a strong state to the BJP and the voice of the under-classes to new, assertive caste-based formations in much, though not all, of India.

In the past, and especially in the Indira period, one family managed to combine both these strands, if in a fluid, transient manner. It is a measure of the power of the Nehru family and the magic of the Gandhi name that the party, once out of power for a while, turned to another member of the clan to take charge once again. What drove the Congress leaders to Sonia Gandhi's door in 1998 was the belief that

she could evoke the memory of power, serve as a unifier of the organisation, and win for it a place in the people's hearts.

**T**he Congress is by no means the only party to give clan and kin such a role of prominence and power. As many as 14 national and state parties have done so, reflecting perhaps the significance of kinship in the body politic as much as in society. But few have turned to someone with lack of a past record of political engagement. By reserving the prime post of Congress president and leader of the parliamentary party for a member of one family, the organisation shuts the door to other women and men of talent in its own ranks.

The only person in the party's history to inherit power was Rajiv in 1984; Indira earned her way to the top and only emerged as leader in her own right after a series of pitched battles, first within her party and then in the country at large. Jawaharlal Nehru did head the Congress, but the torch was passed into his hands not by Motilal Nehru as much as by Mahatma Gandhi who was confident that 'the future of the nation is safe in his hands.'

The results are all too evident. Symbol ranks over substance. When confronted with resurgent and assertive Hindutva, Sonia Gandhi reacts in a tactical manner but with little evidence of any long-term plan for a strategic battle. One does not have to be a rationalist to realise that meeting the Shankaracharya at the Kumbh Mela in Prayag sends a clear signal that one is on the side of orthodoxy and not reform. The *maths* were the very forces that raged against Gandhiji's bid to reform Hinduism.

More ominously, the entire Gujarat campaign in 2002 found Congress falling between two stools. It is not so much a question of visiting

temples or religious sites as of not confronting the basic premises of Hindutva in a head-on manner. This is precisely what Jawaharlal Nehru did in 1948 and Indira Gandhi did prior to her own dalliance with a soft saffron line in 1983-84.

**S**uch a principled stand may not have won the elections, but at least it would have marked the corner the party chooses to stand in at a time of deep divisions and strident campaigns preaching retributive violence. It is not enough for a political party to fete brave campaigners against carnage in New Delhi. This, even while behaving like a B-team of the saffron camp in Gandhinagar.

If in the early 1980s, the BJP via Gandhian socialism tried to be a clone of the Congress, the reverse appears the case at times. Even worse, it is unable to put the ruling party on the defensive on the issue of terrorism, even though two of its own most-preminent leaders fell prey to assassins. This proposition holds true despite significant initiatives at the state level as in the tie up with the PDP in Jammu and Kashmir.

The lack of a vision is matched in the economic sphere. The Congress' own social base, as all surveys indicate, remains strongest among the lower social strata. This is still true in a general sense despite all the fissures in its vote banks, whether by left parties, the Hindutva social work groups, Dalit and Mandalite forces or regional formations. But the party has little to offer such groups by way of a vision and a programme.

True, in states such as MP and Chhattisgarh, decentralisation, land reforms and educational reforms have been given extra emphasis. But in the rest of the country, Congress governments, though less raucous than in the past, have hardly performed in an out-

standing manner. In New Delhi, it has a cautious, halting view on issues like disinvestment, unable to endorse or oppose measures whole-heartedly. The fissures usually evident in a governing party are as visible in the case of the Congress. Perhaps it is so inured to power that it lacks the flexibility and reflexes that an opposition formation ought to have.

The social base of the party is large and diverse enough for it to search hard before it comes up with convincing answers. So far there is little evidence of a serious search for workable concepts that combine elements of pragmatism with a principled stance. If it wants to take on and supplant the BJP, now in power for nearly five years, the Congress will have to come up with more than secular slogans and a cry that prices are rising. If not, it will have to get ready to spend another spell in opposition, not a bad thing in itself but which until now has not been used creatively by the party.

**T**he other dilemma is a critical one. For all the nods and winks especially after Mt. Abu, when the door was opened, if only a bit, to the possibility of sharing power, the party's instincts militate against the idea. The only cases where there is a genuine power sharing on a somewhat equitable basis are in Maharashtra (with the NCP) and in Jammu and Kashmir (with Mufti Mohammed Sayeed's party). Both are post-poll arrangements, which may not last longer than a term in office. Each is held together by the fear that a lack of unity will let a strong regional adversary back into office.

But when one turns to the larger centrist parties, there is little room for compromise. The nub of the problem is the Samajwadi Party-Congress relationship. It is ironic that despite Mulayam Singh Yadav's first ministry being propped up by the Congress

after he first split from the Janata Dal, his relations with Congress have always been strained. This notwithstanding that he served as Union defence minister in a UF government that was possible only due to Congress support. But he refused to repay in full measure in April 1999 when the NDA ministry lost its majority. In November 2002, Sonia repaid him in the same coin by refusing to commit the Congress clutch of 23 MLAs in UP to his side when he tried toppling Mayawati.

**T**he Congress is unwilling to face the fact that no one has secured a majority for his or her party for five general elections in a row. The first step would be to try arriving at a programmatic unity with like-minded forces on a minimal programme. This would keep options open for each party or group to pursue its own long term goals but enable them to join forces on issues of common concern. Further, the party would have to reconsider its ostrich-like reluctance to share power at the Centre. There is no reason why such hesitation should dictate policy. All the more so when the only Congress prime minister in the last decade was one who ran a minority government while doing a balancing act.

The problem is partly in its serious misreading of history. Too many in its higher echelons still believe that it is only a matter of time before people once again turn to the Congress. But it is possible that we are living through a transition: the Congress ceased to be the fulcrum of the polity during the Rajiv period. It is now ceasing to be the natural party of power. The BJP may not have evolved to fill that slot but in alliance with an array of forces it has taken over that space. The Congress' dilemma is deeper than one of its divorce from power. The party needs to ask itself what it stands for.

# Conflict and coexistence in our age

SONIA GANDHI

I MUST straightaway declare my partiality.

I love that other place where I first met my husband 35 years ago and where his grandfather, India's first Prime Minister, took his Tripos.

But Oxford also has a claim on my loyalty. My mother-in-law, Indira Gandhi, whose portrait I presented to Somerville College this morning, went up to Oxford during 1937-39.

Oxford has made notable contributions not only to the spread of the wisdom of the western world, but also to the understanding of the civilisations of the East. For the people of India, Oxford will always be linked with the names of Monier-Williams, Max Mueller and S. Radhakrishnan, who enabled the world to understand the profundity and eternal relevance of India's ancient thought. A number

of noted Indian political leaders, historians, economists, sociologists and scientists have been trained at this great citadel of learning. And it is a matter of pride that a scholar from our state of Uttar Pradesh is the Director of this Centre.

Rabindranath Tagore once described Oxford as a symbol of the undying spirit of man. That spirit is reflected in the activities of this Centre, whose proclaimed objective is to increase the mutual knowledge and understanding between the Islamic and the western world. Among the distinguished statesmen who have preceded me here, several have been notable Islamic scholars. I cannot lay claim to scholarship but I take the expression 'Islamic World' more to be a political figure of speech than a term with clear and precise geographical boundaries.

There are more Muslims in India than in any other country save Indo-

\* Speech at the Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies, Oxford University, Friday, 29 November 2002.

nesia. Similarly, there are more Hindus in India than in any other country. There are also more Christians in India than in many countries recognised as Christian. But India is not a Hindu country or a Muslim country or a Christian country. It belongs to all of them and the millions of followers of other religions as well.

Over the past 13 centuries, Islam has influenced Indian civilisation in its various facets. The works of Islamic historians like Al-Biruni still remain standard references on our country. The great achievements of Indian astronomers and mathematicians in the middle of the first millennium were transmitted by Islamic scholars to the rest of the world. What would the modern world be without the zero and without the system of numerals—both Indian inventions that were propagated by Central Asians and Arabs. Indian art and architecture, literature and poetry, language, music and philosophy, and even textiles and crafts, have all been enriched by Islam.

**T**he eclectic Sufi tradition is an integral part of Indian Islam. The interaction of Sufism with the Bhakti movement gave rise to several egalitarian and reformist orders. It was Dara Shikoh's translation of the Upanishads into Persian that served as the basis of the discovery of this treasure by the world at large. India has also had a decisive impact on Islamic thought, and some of the greatest Islamic philosophers, theologians and poets have hailed from the subcontinent. The practice of Islam itself in the subcontinent reflects local influences and represents the synthesis with existing beliefs and values. This also reveals the enormous scope that Islam provides for a variety of spiritual experiences.

Indian literature extolling our composite culture and heritage is vast. I recall particularly the seminal con-

tributions of four prominent Indians—Swami Vivekananda, Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru and Maulana Azad. Maulana Azad is one of the most erudite scholars of Islam in modern times. He was among the closest colleagues of Mahatma Gandhi and a front-rank leader of the Indian freedom movement. In his Presidential address to the plenary session of the Indian National Congress in 1940, he said: 'I am a Muslim and profoundly conscious of the fact that I have inherited Islam's glorious traditions of the last thirteen hundred years. I am not prepared to lose even a small part of that legacy... I am equally proud of the fact that I am an Indian, an essential part of the indivisible unity of Indian nationhood, a vital factor in its total make-up without which its noble edifice will remain incomplete. I can never give up this sincere claim. It was India's historic destiny that its soil should become the destination of many different caravans of races, cultures and religions. Even before the dawn of history's morning, they started their trek into India and the process has continued since.'

**S**tudents of Indian history are certain to remind you that in Maulana Azad's own lifetime, many Muslims in India did not think like him and opted for a separate state of their own. But more Muslims remained in India than those who chose Pakistan. In recent years some political parties have been proclaiming that India belongs to the majority community. But have no doubt. Although their voices are loud and figure prominently in the media, they are a handful. Secularism is India's destiny because her people have willed it. The founding fathers of the Indian nation were men of wisdom and insight. They knew that religion is a vital force in India that should not be legislated away.

As was often the case, Gandhiji, a deeply religious man, said it best: 'I do not want my house to be walled in on all sides and my windows to be stuffed. I want the cultures of all lands to blow about my house as freely as possible. But I refuse to be blown off my feet by any.'

To say this is not to deny the fact that there have been numerous periods in our history when rulers attempted to spread particular religions with force. But theirs were singularly unproductive times. The radiant ages of Indian history when the fame of India spread in the world were those ages when tolerance prevailed. Periods of economic expansion were also periods of great spiritual achievements. And economic prosperity and social amity went hand-in-hand, a lesson not without its modern-day relevance.

**I**ndia is a land of the greatest diversities and infinite varieties. I use the plural advisedly. It is a country with at least 18 major languages and over 400 important dialects. It is a land that has given rise to four of the world's major religions. As I mentioned earlier, it is home to the world's second largest Muslim population. It welcomed Christianity long before Europe embraced it. India has always offered refuge to people fleeing from religious persecution whether they be Jews or Zoroastrians. It is a society with over 4000 ethnic communities or castes or endogamous groups. It is a land comprising different ecological and cultural regions each with its own distinctive history. India is thus a multi-religious, multi-linguistic, multi-ethnic and multi-regional civilisation without a parallel.

The record of a relatively young Indian nation state in managing these bewildering array of diversities, admittedly amidst trials and tribulations, is one of the remarkable achievements

of contemporary times. Jawaharlal Nehru described India as:

'An ancient palimpsest on which layer upon layer of thought and reverie had been inscribed and yet no succeeding layer had completely hidden or erased what had been written previously... though outwardly there was diversity and infinite variety among our people, everywhere there was that tremendous impress of oneness, which had held all of us together for ages past, whatever political fate or misfortune had befallen us.'

One of the defining principles of contemporary India is unity in diversity. But there is something more. India exemplifies a complex unity *through* diversity, a society in which the celebration of diversity strengthens the bonds of our modern nation. I might add that India's diversities are not just numerous. They are also alive and assertive.

**I**t is India's multilayered parliamentary democracy that provides the framework within which all of our peoples' voices are heard and their aspirations pursued. Democracy has taken firm root in India and has proved its resilience time and again. It is an instrument both of representation and empowerment. The flexibility of our Constitution has helped us accommodate diversities in a peaceful and negotiated manner. Affirmative action embedded deeply into the fabric of our democracy is giving new hope to the disadvantaged sections of society, not least of which are women. Today, there are over a million of them, elected representatives transforming our countryside. The creation of new states has kept centrifugal tensions at bay, and the reconfiguration of India's internal geography has been an important element in managing its diversities, while adhering to the rule of law.

Tremendous social ferment is taking place throughout the country. This churning does, on occasions, result in conflict. From the outside, its scale may get magnified, and it may appear that India is frequently in turmoil. The truth is that, at any given point of time, the vast majority of our people live in harmony and peace. There is, indeed, something powerful that gives strength and resilience to our society even as it is subject to varied stresses and strains. And that something is secularism and democracy – two complementary forms of tolerance as the Mexican Nobel Laureate Octavio Paz once put it.

**W**e are meeting against the background of growing international terrorism and the fallout of what has come to be known as 9/11. What is striking and remarkable is that international terrorist networks do not seem to have a hold on Indian Muslims. That is entirely because our political and social framework accommodates plurality in substantial measure. All over the world an impression has been created that Islam and terrorism are inseparable. The fact that there are any number of terrorist organisations whose members subscribe to other religions is conveniently forgotten.

India has been a continuous victim of cross-border terrorism. Both Hindus and Muslims have been targeted alike. This is particularly so in our state of Jammu and Kashmir where it is evident that the terrorists are acting in pursuance of the foreign policy of our neighbour to the west. It would be wrong to think that religion is their motive. Nevertheless, I should point out that, by the postures it adopts and the actions it takes, this neighbour provides a ready handle to those who stoke communal antagonisms within India. There are also religious and

political leaders on both sides who feed on each other's passions.

Terrorism has no religion. In fact, it is the antithesis of religion, for the essence of all religions is compassion. A major effort has to be made to enable people to appreciate this truth. Inter-faith dialogue and communication at various levels and in different forums, has to be sustained to help improve mutual understanding. Religious extremism very often is born out of perceived threats. These threats can be dealt with only through analysis, debate and engagement. This Centre has an important role to play in this regard.

The new challenge that the world will face in this evolving century is decentralised terrorism on the part of well-organised political and ethnic groups armed with sophisticated weaponry. Their aim is to create panic amongst the largest numbers of innocent men, women and children. Humankind must urgently move to deal with this menace caused by zealots who deliberately misuse religion.

**T**error should not be combated with greater terror. Though no end can justify mindless violence, ultimately the roots of terrorism have to be located in political, social and economic factors. Prosperity can breed terrorism as much as poverty can. A globalisation process that is seen to be inequitable and destabilising of cultural moorings can trigger terrorist mindsets. A political system that is closed and does not fulfil the aspirations of the people can create conditions which encourage dangerous ideologies.

9/11 was a colossal tragedy and all of us reached out spontaneously to America in that moment of grief. It is regrettable that the world woke up to the threat of terrorism only after the horrific events of that day. Terrorism cannot, and should not, be dealt with



in a selective and segmented manner within the framework of individual nation states and their priorities. Now that all of us are aware of the horrendous consequences of international terrorism, and the threat of weapons of mass destruction, we must sustain a collective campaign against them with single-minded focus.

This campaign should be framed and implemented on a clear understanding that terrorism is indivisible, international and is perpetrated not only by non-state actors but also by some governments as an instrument of their state policy. The approach that says, 'the terrorism I face is of higher priority than the terrorism you face' is illogical, and has dangerous implications for global stability and security. Equally grave is the cross-border flow of funds through different channels that help support terrorist organizations. This must be dealt with comprehensively and globally.

**I**t has become fashionable to talk of an impending 'clash of civilisations'. The Indian experience strongly disproves this approach. The concept of a deep fault line across world religions and its resulting inevitably in conflict, lends itself to mischievous distortions and misrepresentations, both internationally and within our own societies. Complex political, social and economic realities cannot be reduced to a simplistic confrontation between religions. All of us need to guard against this.

Cherishing and upholding tolerance at home, it is but natural that India should champion coexistence amongst the nations of the world as well. Panchsheel – the five principles of peaceful coexistence derived from the Buddha's teachings and given contemporary relevance by Jawaharlal Nehru – still holds great meaning. Let me recapitulate what these principles

are: mutual respect for each other's territorial integrity and sovereignty, mutual nonaggression, mutual non-interference in each other's internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit and peaceful coexistence.

Conflict and coexistence cannot be managed by any one single country, however well-meaning and powerful it may be. There is an urgent need to redesign international institutions so that they reflect contemporary realities. They must have an effective say in the management of global issues. The most recent Security Council resolution on Iraq has given multilateralism a fresh lease of life – and we hope that this will be a long enough lease for the UN to be renewed and restructured. Globalisation will prove equitable and sustainable only if serious attention is paid to its governance both within and across nations.

The USA is now the world's pre-eminent power in every sense of the term. But the paradox of this power is that it cannot afford to act unilaterally. Many in the United States are impatient with multilateralism, but in today's interdependent world there is simply no alternative to working in concert and collaboration with each other. We fervently hope that the United States recognises the desirability and feasibility of multilateralism. At the same time, other countries have a responsibility to keep the USA involved and committed to international agreements and institutions.

Let me now turn to South Asia where one-fifth of humanity resides. Our aim is that this region must be free of tensions so that the seven countries can individually and collectively address common economic, social and ecological problems – and these are present in abundance. How long can we afford to be prisoners of the past? The future beckons. We owe it to our own people to chart a new course in a bold and an imaginative manner. The

large and gifted subcontinental diaspora has an important role to play here.

I want to say a few words on West Asia, a region with which India has long had an intimate cultural and economic relationship. We recognise the rights of the Palestinian people to a viable state of their own as well as the right of Israel to live within secure borders. While we condemn all forms of violence and terrorism, we believe that there can be no lasting peace in West Asia without the legitimate concerns of the Palestinian people being addressed meaningfully.

Growing economic and strategic cooperation between India and Israel does not make us insensitive to this reality. We have watched closely the developments relating to Iraq in recent months. As a founding member of the UN, India is deeply committed to the principles of its charter. It is our view that the question of Iraq cannot be dealt with unilaterally. Concepts like 'regime change' are fraught with grave dangers.

**I**would like to say a few words about the state of Jammu and Kashmir, where the people voted in the recent elections fearlessly, despite heavy odds. These elections are a decisive watershed because they reestablish the vitality and durability of our democracy. The world community must appreciate the new expectations of the people of Jammu and Kashmir for ending of this spiral of terrorist inspired violence and killings.

Jammu and Kashmir defines India's secular nationhood. Of course, it is a special case and that is recognised as such in the Indian Constitution. India has respected that distinct character. There has, for example, been no attempt made to alter the demographic character of the state or to stifle its cultural and religious heritage. And Jammu and Kashmir, it must not

be forgotten, is a crucible of Muslim, Hindu, Sikh and Buddhist cultures.

The newly elected coalition government is devoting itself to reducing the alienation of the people. This, you will appreciate, will take some time. But we are determined to maintain the momentum of this process.

I began by recalling India's composite heritage. I then spoke about how we are successfully managing its many diversities. I moved on to talk about international and regional terrorism and dealt with some aspects of our foreign policy. Let me once again underscore that diversities and multiple identities have defined India for millennia. But there are clear dangers that they could well be used to divide us. This is the central challenge confronting the overwhelming number of our people who are wedded to a vision of an India that is one and many at the same time. That oneness must be reinforced, the variety must be nurtured.

As we look back, we can derive some satisfaction that we have put in place a system of ideas and institutions to ensure that this happens. It is, by no means, smooth sailing. But political democracy is strong enough, social diversity is valued enough, and economic development is robust enough to help us navigate ourselves through the storms and tempests that lash every once in a while threatening to blow us away. What sustains us is the thought expressed so evocatively in Rock Edict XII of our great Emperor Asoka, who ruled in the third century BC over a territory that extended well beyond present-day India. This edict is in a region of Gujarat and its words resonate even today:

The faiths of all deserve to be honoured for one reason or another. By honouring them one exalts one's own faith and at the same time performs a service to the faith of others. By acting otherwise, one injures one's own faith and does disservice to that of others.

## Comparative frames

GRANVILLE AUSTIN

COMPARING and contrasting the public life of the two countries under their constitutions turns up characteristics that cheer and depress me. For I am at once an American and a devotee of India; each nation has achieved so much while falling short of its constitutional goals. The editors at *Seminar* have kindly given me leave to turn over all this in my own mind. Readers should forgive them, but not necessarily me, for what follows.

All democracies muddle through. Human character and the events that confront societies are so various and unpredictable that human beings have limited capacity to control or to order them. Constitutions may establish frameworks for governance and the rules of the political game, they may channel human action, but they cannot reform individual character and conduct. Above all, constitutions cannot dictate the geographical and environmental conditions with which their societies have to cope – although the Indian Constitution contains detailed provisions that to a degree address these conditions. When comparing and contrasting the constitutional careers of India and the United States, the conditions at the onset of their national lives are especially important.

The United States started its national life with innumerable advantages. Its small population had the

stage of an empty continent to play upon, rich resources, time to develop largely beyond the world's attention and the pressure of modern times, a philosophy of individual freedom and initiative that imposed few limits on personal achievement, and a rich cultural inheritance from Europe, something not free from disadvantages.

**C**onversely, India has been forced to build its democracy under the glare of international scrutiny and among nations highly competitive when not actually at war with each other (hot or cold). Its peoples were compressed on limited arable land, even in 1950 with a population of 250 million. Natural resources were ill-distributed, especially water – whereas the United States had enough territory to bypass its deserts and driest areas. Pressures from America's increasing population could be relieved through the open frontier; India had no such luxury. India's society had, and in general still has, a hierarchical society inimical to individual initiative and freedom, although the society's top one-third is outgrowing these restraints.

Both continent-sized countries have had to unify themselves into nations. The United States, as we all know, started with 13 colonies often at odds with one another. The highly diverse regions that over time joined the Union included states that permitted slave-holding and those that did not. Fought primarily over slavery, the Civil War threatened to sunder the country. (The Union became complete comparatively recently: Arizona joined in 1914, and Alaska and Hawaii in 1949.) 'States rights' in many forms continue to be contentious.

India in 1947 faced double trouble. Its equivalent of the American Civil War came when Partition actually divided the subcontinent into Pakistan and India. India's leaders,

particularly during the first two decades, had to cement the geographical proximity of the country's constituent units into psychological, political and economic unity. This was a critical matter during the periods when Shyama Prasad Mookherji was calling for the annulment of Partition, when Master Tara Singh was advocating a separate Punjab, when the Communists were rebelling in Telengana, when the Tamils were dreaming of cultural nationhood for Dravidanad, and when Jammu and Kashmir's status within India was being questioned.

**O**ther dangers to national unity and integrity may have been overdrawn in the leaders' minds, as I have argued in *Working a Democratic Constitution – The Indian Experience*. Prime Minister Nehru and many other leaders in the Congress and other parties feared that the 'isms' of linguism, regionalism, provincialism and communalism (a blanket term in which they included the other 'isms', not only Hindu-Muslim relations) impeded both the achievement of national unity and social-economic progress. Worse, they feared the famous fissiparous tendencies might tear the country apart. Happily, the leaders have been proven wrong. India's innumerable horizontally and vertically divided communities have learned to cohabit successfully – despite often competing political, economic and cultural interests. A sense of Indianness among citizens has developed, and today the country is knit politically and economically.

Yet these fears when they were strong helped to encourage New Delhi's predilection for strongly centralised government. When the fissiparous tendencies had paled to insignificance, politicians resurrected them to justify their arrogance of power. Save for the Civil War, and early

skirmishes like the Whisky Rebellion, no threat to national unity has thus concerned Washington or state capitals. Quite the reverse. The United States bought Louisiana from France, Alaska from Russia, and in battle won Texas from Mexico.

Especially interesting to me is the manner in which the diversities within Indian and American societies have contributed to their richness. This is evident in diversities' contributions to national cultures – in the arts, music, literature, language, group histories, and in special commercial and managerial talents. Diversities also present the countries' national and constituent governments with a host of difficulties. Equity issues arising from social and economic conditions beset each country. The lower rungs in both societies, the poor, those racially and linguistically distinct, are ignored or discriminated against by the upper rungs of society, who have more money and influence with government, and who are satisfied with their lot and wish it left undisturbed by concern for the wellbeing of others.

**I**n the United States, lack of equitableness harms African-Americans, Hispanics, especially migrant workers, American Indians and European-Americans with little money – apart from the gender discrimination within these categories. For example, for African-Americans the right to vote has been a reality only for some 40 years, although it was granted to them by the fifteenth constitutional amendment in 1870. The government of California, with a large Hispanic population, presently is considering legislation that would make English the state's language – a move that is both oppressive and integrationist.

Migrant agricultural workers are exploited shamelessly. Forty million Americans, largely in these cat-

egories, lack health insurance and face corresponding risks to their health and job security. Many eat poorly. They have inferior access to justice, compared to others, and to equitable treatment in the courts despite the existence of court-provided public defenders, the considerable number of attorneys doing *pro bono* work, and government and private legal aid groups. Government financial support to these has several times been reduced on political grounds. For the richest country in the world to so maltreat elements of its society weakens its pretensions to greatness.

**R**eaders of *Seminar* will be well acquainted with conditions in India. Neglect, exploitation and oppression of the lower castes/classes by the upper are a shame upon the social revolutionary goals placed in the Constitution by the founding fathers and mothers. But oppression in India should be understood to derive from the history of the caste system. Americans have no such heritage. Excepting slavery, American society grew from the immigration of political and religious free thinkers and seekers after a tolerable livelihood. Class they brought with them, and often a narrowness of thought, but not religion-sanctioned hierarchy – except in Boston in the 17th century.

In India, history may explain, but does not justify, the indifference of many citizens toward the condition of others. Most deplorable, perhaps, is the decline in the quality of the judiciary at all levels, bar and bench alike, which was to be the poor's protector. The poor have difficulty gaining access to a court and then to a fair hearing; the rich encounter the money and wiles of the richer. Judicial processes, from the subordinate courts to the Supreme Court, impede as often as they favour justice.

Civil liberty is a right the poor in India seldom enjoy despite its having been enshrined in the Constitution. First, as has long been said, the hungry man is not free. Next, the better off, in general, think it their privilege to deny liberty to those below them in society if it suits their interests to do so. This sort of repression/oppression – economic, social, and political – challenges the democratic institutions of the Constitution as does nothing else. Under the Constitution there are various laws including the Indian Penal Code and the Criminal Procedure Code. If enforced, they would go a great distance to protecting citizen liberty.

I have wondered for some years if liberty's protection isn't best to be found in constitutional challenges under Article 14 of the Fundamental Rights. This is the 'right of equality' and says that the state shall not deny any person 'equality before the law or the equal protection of the laws' within India. To me, clearly, if a landlord oppresses a tenant or an agricultural labourer in a manner that violates existing law, the state (a fancy term for the government) owes the tenant protection under Article 14. If the tenant cannot get speedy redress from institutions of government, the judiciary for example, the government is denying him equality before the law, and the government, therefore, is at fault for not obeying the Constitution. One could put forward many similar examples.

**L**et us take this argument a step further. Landless labourers, whose grievances (genuine for the sake of this example) have gone unheeded, take their case to court. Their influence there is no match for the money and influence of their higher caste employers. Was not government responsible for denying the labourers equality before

the law? Let us say that the upper caste villagers decide to teach the labourers a lesson, attack their village and devastate it, killing many. Where were the police when either party initiated violence? Did the police protect the labourers' village? Did they arrest and charge the upper caste leaders, or did they side with them against the labourers? Did the executive in the state or at the Centre order the police to give either party the protection of the law? If not, can we say that the Constitution is faring well or ill in India?

**I**n the United States, too, there are many instances of failure to protect the rights of individuals or groups, especially minority groups or those espousing unpopular causes. Rarely in recent times has this taken the form of murderous attack by one group against another or the lynching of individuals. Yet even far less serious infringements of civil liberty in the United States are reprehensible because the branches of government are not functioning at a high standard.

Conversely, the violations of personal liberty in India are so enormous and pervasive that Article 14 might be employed for taking cases directly to the Supreme Court under its original jurisdiction for enforcement of the fundamental right to equal protection of the law. Because protests or violence by lower castes/classes against higher castes/classes predictably will increase, recourse under this article may not be long in the future. I should add that senior advocate friends in New Delhi are not taken with my ideas about Article 14.

From history and ideology Indians are predisposed toward a major government role in social-economic welfare programmes. *Maibaap* is an ingrained attitude, and governments have pursued socialist policies – not all of them misguided, as critics aver.

(I am impressed by K. Santhanam's remark in the sixties that India needed not a socialism of production but a socialism of distribution.) Now governments are beginning to give rein to the entrepreneurial spirit that Nehru and early leaders so distrusted. Yet, it seems to me that the country appears to be reaching toward corporate capitalism without paying sufficient attention to its exploitative character in a still-feudal society.

**C**onversely, Americans still fear the perils of government involvement in social programmes, of socialised medicine, of the alleged corrupting effect of 'welfare' on its human recipients, and of government curbs on private business initiative (of which, nevertheless, there are many). Americans preach capitalism's strength and fear these insidious threats to it. Yet whenever it suits them corporations seek government intervention to save them from bankruptcy or to prevent dangerous competition from a competitor. American capitalism is amusingly two-faced and, as readers of current newspapers know, is subject to immense dishonesty.

I am continually perplexed by most Indians' failure to connect the poor – in some states abysmal – quality of primary education to the progress of national development. Nehru promoted higher and technical education for the sake of national development. He erred in neglecting lower levels of schooling, but at least it was a policy choice. Today, the lack of attention to primary education among the bureaucrats in Delhi and some state capitals seems to be tinged with unconscious conspiracy: if we educate the natives they'll become restless. Who cares if they are kept down, in ignorance? It took me a decade to conclude this and, still, I am not sure. Yet no matter motive or lack of it;

India's unwillingness to refine the vast ore of talent among its people is doing vast damage to its economic and social development.

Public education in the United States varies greatly in quality – in general being worst in those urban areas lived in by the poor and minorities. Yet there is public outcry against this condition, and no end of proposed remedies – administrative and curricular – for it. Large sums of money are appropriated for reform, which comes slowly due to widespread confusion about how to raise educational standards. American social and economic development is held back by the existence of an ill-educated underclass. The gap in income between the members of this underclass and those in the well-educated upper classes increases yearly.

**I**n both countries the principal source of inaction or inadequate action directed at social-economic development is lack of political will. And the roots of this malaise are selfishness in regard to the wellbeing of others (a frequent element in human character), a greed for money and power, and the offspring of these two evils, corruption. Again, readers of *Seminar* need not be told of ministers and parliamentarians and lesser functionaries in India who believe they hold their positions by something akin to divine right and for the purpose of personal and in-group self-enrichment. That this form of corruption, practiced in India by large numbers of politicians and some civil servants, is an individualised phenomenon. It does not indicate, in my view, that the political system as a whole is infected by a solitary virus.

Whereas in the United States, money, the 'mother's milk of politics' contaminates the entire electoral system, which operates with enormous

cash contributions to political parties and to legislators – even in non-election years – from wealthy individuals, labour unions and corporations. As a student-of-India friend of mine puts it, Indians buy their politicians retail, Americans buy theirs wholesale. Witness in India the tolerance of corruption, although even the poor seem to be beginning to vote against it, and in the United States the years it has taken to enact a campaign finance bill (the McCain-Feingold bill) and the energy currently being expended by lobbyists and self-serving members of the Congress to weaken it.

Because members of Congress are elected by voters in the 50 states with the backing of the powerful state parties, Democrat and Republican, the United States is spared the hazards of slates for parliamentary elections being decided by the high commands of centralised parties. Nevertheless, money politics has done and is doing the gravest damage to representative government in both our countries. Corruption in business in both countries, as distinct from politics, I shall leave alone.

**D**ecentralisation, bringing elected representatives closer to voters in the states, may produce improvements in both countries for many of the conditions described above. President Richard Nixon in the seventies transferred many programme responsibilities to the states. He did this in large part to rid himself of competition from the Washington bureaucracy – which he considered an enemy. His downsizing of the federal government increased the size of state bureaucracies, which had to cope with new responsibilities. This was a change from Kennedy era attempts at social engineering by the federal government.

Nixon's policy and subsequent decentralisations have prodded many

state governments into solving their own problems, into cooperation with other states on cross-border issues like resource utilisation and environment, and into improved performance in general. The performance of many state governments now outshines that of the central government. I suspect and hope that decentralisation in India—including the mandating of village panchayats—will bring similar results. Government will be healthier and more productive if several of the recommendations of the National Commission to Review the Working of the Constitution and of the Sarkaria Commission are adopted.

**P**articularly important to the National Commission, and in my personal view, is rescuing the Interstate Council from oblivion and giving it extensive powers. Government in India and national unity and integrity would be strengthened by this. Strong state participation in federal affairs strengthens, not weakens, the nation. The National Commission, following on from the Sarkaria Commission, also recommends selection of governors by criteria that could prevent their becoming puppets for New Delhi. These criteria go back to the founding of the Republic; yet rarely have they been applied. Until governments at the Centre gain faith in democratic governance and stop thinking that they can govern the states better than the states can govern themselves, there will be no reformed selection process for governors. The National Commission's recommendation 172 for improvements in Article 356 badly needs to be adopted—as does its recommendation 184 that a panchayat should not be dissolved before it has had the opportunity to speak for itself.

The militancy of certain religious groups within our two societies concerns me greatly. In both coun-

tries, to varying degrees, this has a nationalist dimension. Although in the United States ugly and a hazard to civil liberty, this militancy does not endanger the very fabric of the nation as it does in India. The ideology of the Sangh Parivar threatens India as a democratic; civil society and, therefore, its national unity and integrity. This ideology would destroy India's good standing among world nations. Among the many possible examples; I could cite several recent ones. Bal Thackeray, according to press reports, has told his party workers that, 'Terrorists should be born among Hindus and they must form suicide squads ready to die for the cause of making this a Hindu Rashtra.'

The Bharatiya Janata Party is reported to think that his remarks cannot be interpreted as communal or inciting communal passions. What a fine example of Orwellian double-speak! K.S. Sudarshan told *India Abroad*, issue of October 18, that when 'Hindus become strong, Muslims will behave...' He blamed Godhra on 'pro-Pakistani elements'. Chief Minister Jayalalitha, according to *India Abroad* the same issue, has had an ordinance promulgated making criminal conversions by 'force, allurements or fraudulent means'. What is fraudulent? What is an allurement: rice to become Christian, absence of caste to become a Buddhist, a glorious hereafter with houris and flowing water to become Muslim? The potential for abuse is endless.

**T**he torching of the train at Godhra was murder. The subsequent attacks on Muslims in Gujarat were murder. The killings stained India, and the Gujarat government was culpable through its failure to prevent them. Had these murders coincided with war between India and Pakistan, it seems probable that the Sangh Parivar forces

in the state would have attacked Muslims, threatening to drive these 'Pakistanis', as it has called them, from the state. To make Hinduness a requirement for Indianness is the worst kind of ugliness. First, it represents 'Hinduism' as having a monolithic structure, whereas there are multiple local faiths devoted to shared deities. Also, it is a denial of history and India's rich and varied culture. In short, it is nationalism gone mad.

**I**n my view, the media is indirectly culpable for communal tensions. Its practice of referring to 'minorities' instead of naming the minority community indicates a head-in-the-sand psychology. It implies, if we don't name Muslims, Dalits, whatever, we can ignore their pleas for equitable treatment in our society. The minority is denied identity and stature. The minority's plight is being swept under the rug. I understand the argument that naming the minority may spark further violence. But rumours about communal violence kill more citizens than the truth. Communalism and communal incidents and violence have to be faced publicly and fought publicly. It is the media's job to assure that citizens do not forget this.

In the United States, fortunately, we have not reached such a pass. Yet the narrow militant groups such as the evangelical, born again, and Bible-inerrancy Christians, don't like either Jews or Muslims. They call the latter dangerous and suspect all American-citizen Muslims of having terrorist inclinations. Jerry Falwell, leader of the Christian Coalition, recently labelled the Prophet a terrorist. These groups and these views exert great influence in President Bush's Republican Party. Worse yet, underneath these views lies a distorted nationalism: the belief that the world should do as the United States wants, that the nation's largely

Christian character justifies American world hegemony. This idiocy already puts at risk the civil liberties of individuals the government chooses to suspect and, by extension, the rule of law in the country. Luckily, it does not yet endanger the nation's peace or unity.

**W**hat is to be made of all this? First, in both India and the United States there exists a vibrant representative democracy with which to tackle the necessary tasks and reforms. The constituencies for democracy in India include elected and appointed officials, central and state, the media, the armed forces, and the general electorate with its multitude of interest groups, caste affiliations and so on. That each supports democracy for its own reasons is what makes democracy messy and better than other systems. The same may be said about the United States. Second, both societies understand the need to reform the working of their political systems and judiciaries and to extend equitable participation to those in their societies who so far have not enjoyed it.

This is fortunate, for the political classes in both countries seem insufficiently aware of the grave danger to the credibility of representative government from their antics; from their failure to implement desirable social and economic reforms – so similar in both countries; and from their insistent dependence on the money of the rich to win elections. I think it may fairly be said that India has no reason to be ashamed of its progress during its 50 years under the Constitution compared with the results gained in the United States during the past 200-plus years.

This should not convey too rosy a picture. Both countries face difficult futures. The United States faces its tasks led by the Republican Party's

radical right economic policies, its disinterest in social and political reform, and its born-again (Christian), resolutely unintellectual president (to quote a *New York Times* writer) – a man who seems to believe preaching war against Iraq keeps him politically popular with voters.

India faces its future with the current coalition government and, likely, future coalitions if this one leaves office. This seems to me to have advantages and disadvantages. The advantages have been stable government under an able prime minister. The presence in office in Delhi of so-called 'regional parties' is evidence of solidifying national unity. The stresses within society, predictable as classes, castes, groups (including the Sangh Parivar) strive for a bigger piece of the national pie, will force coalition members to act in concert or be driven from office.

**O**ne disadvantage of coalitions, absent threats to their longevity, is slowness to action, particularly implementing social-economic programmes and reforming institutions. (Regrettably, single-party governments may not be models, witness the United States.) Yet social programmes of all sorts – health and education among them – are what India desperately needs. And reforms, especially in the civil service and the judiciary, are long overdue. A disadvantage in all representative political systems – more so for coalitions because of their inherent fragility – is summary rejection by the voters for non-performance. Indira Gandhi's Congress and the Janata government in 1977 and 1980, respectively, suffered this. Political castles in the air crumbled for want of a foundation in performance. I shouldn't be surprised to witness this phenomenon in one of our countries sooner rather than later.



# Some reflections on the Hindu theory of tolerance

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IN recent years Hindu activists have attacked Christian missionaries, churches and mosques and made distasteful remarks about Islam and Christianity. For their apologists these are uncharacteristic aberrations provoked by minority intransigence that has stretched the traditional Hindu tolerance to its limits. Their critics see these events as predictable expression of the spirit of intolerance that lies at the heart of Hindu thought and which has long been obscured by the Orientalist myth of Hindu tolerance conveniently popularised during the colonial era.

In this paper I step back from the immediate context of this controversy and use it to reflect on the basis and limits of Hindu tolerance. The paper is divided into two parts. In the first part I elucidate the philosophical grounds and the logical structure of the Hindu theory of tolerance.<sup>1</sup> In the second I examine their strengths and weaknesses, and conclude that the Hindu claim to be a tolerant people is only partially sustainable.

Hindu theory of tolerance is grounded in and overdetermined by the following four beliefs, which have

played and continue to play an important part in Hindu thought. First, primacy of conduct. Hindus hold that the ethical quality of life and not a body of dogmas lies at the heart of religion, and matters most. Religion represents a way of life, and is to be judged by the kind of life it inspires.

Beliefs are not important in themselves but only insofar as they affect one's ability to lead the good life, and are to be assessed not in terms of their cognitive validity but their moral effects. Hindus are therefore allowed a considerable freedom of religious belief including borrowing those of other religions provided that they lead what the wider society takes to be an acceptable way of life.

Second, a dharmic view of morality. The ethically acceptable life is one lived according to dharma or a set of moral duties. Dharma is divided into two types: *sadharanadharma* or universally binding duties such as telling the truth, non-injury to other living beings, non-stealing, purity, freedom from envy and control of passions, and *varnashramadharma* or the duties pertaining to one's caste and stage in life. Unlike the former which is the same for all, the latter is relative to and varies with the individual's caste and stage in life. Except in the case of the renunciates who step out of the social order altogether, the good life in the Hindu view is one that meets the demands of both, especially the latter.

\* I am most grateful to Professors Dhirubhai Sheth, Dhiren Narain, Rajni Kothari, Abdul Momin, Achyut Yagnik and Thomas Pantham for several long and helpful discussions on the basic ideas of this paper.

1. The Hindu religious tradition obviously speaks in many different voices, and cannot be homogenised. I concentrate on what I take to be its classical and dominant strand.



This idea is also extended to non-Hindu societies, each believed to have its own view of dharma which it is entitled to follow. In the traditional Hindu society, such non-Hindu communities as existed were generally entitled to live by their traditional customs and practices. According to *Dharmasastras*, their dharma is an integral part of their communal identity and collective inheritance, and it is an act of sacrilege to violate it.

Third, individual uniqueness. For Hindus, every individual is the ultimate architect of his life and must work out his salvation himself. Salvation is not a gift or an undeserved act of grace, but a personal achievement based on one's *karma* or deeds. While sharing the *atman* with others, every individual has a distinct self consisting of a unique set of psychological and moral dispositions (*swabhava*), that is a product of his karma in his previous life and which he can and should improve upon in this one.

Every human being goes through a cycle of births in the course of a journey all his own, and builds up a distinct personality or self. No two individuals are therefore ever like or have the same moral and spiritual needs. The mode of worship, the conception of god, and the form of moral and spiritual discipline that suit one individual do not necessarily suit another. Although they all have the same destination, namely liberation from the cycle of rebirth, their paths vary.

Fourth, religious pluralism. For the Hindus the ultimate reality is infinite and cannot by definition be grasped in its totality by the finite human mind. All religions grasp some aspects of it and miss out others. Like the blind men trying to imagine the

size and shape of the elephant on the basis of one particular part of it, different religions represent different and inherently partial visions of the ultimate reality and contain both truth and error.<sup>2</sup> Even though God incarnates Himself in history, He reveals Himself differently to different societies and epochs depending on their capacities and needs. Divine self-revelation is a continuous process, and no religion can claim to offer the final and exhaustive knowledge of God.

For Hindus, all religions are so many different ways of understanding and realising the ultimate reality or what may loosely be called God. As one of the Vedic maxims asserts, 'Truth or Reality is one, though sages call it by different names.'<sup>3</sup> In the *Bhagavadgita*, Krishna says that 'whoever comes to me through whatever route, I reach out to him,' and that 'all paths in the end lead to me.'<sup>4</sup> This raises the question whether some religions might not be wholly misguided or unworthy of respect.

The Hindu response is ambiguous. Some Hindu thinkers rule out this possibility. Some others hold that every religion has a self-correcting mechanism and that a wholly misguided one is bound eventually to collapse under the weight of its errors and false promises. Most, however, admit the possibility of a false or misguided religion, and argue that a religion that violates *sadharanadharma* or universal moral values and enjoins murder, deception, lying, and so on is inherently suspect. In their view certain values are so central to human life that they set limits to what constitutes a religion or one worthy of respect.

These four beliefs form the basis of the Hindu theory and practice of tolerance.

Since religion is concerned with the quality of life and not with subscription to a particular body of dogmas, Hindus argue that all theological and religious disputes are pointless.<sup>5</sup> The dharmic view of morality implies that different individuals and groups should lead different forms of life depending on their caste, psychological make up, traditions, and so on, and that inducing or coercing them to do otherwise violates their moral integrity and damages their wellbeing.

The principle of individual uniqueness implies that no religion suits all equally, that the idea of a single universal religion is fundamentally flawed, that each religion should grant its adherents the freedom to adapt its doctrines and practices to their unique spiritual needs, and that we should encourage tolerance not only of other religions but also within each of them. Finally, religious pluralism implies that since all religions lead to the same destination, mean much to their members, and contain both truth and error, they deserve equal respect. As Radhakrishnan once said, 'tolerance is the homage the finite mind pays to the inexhaustibility of the infinite.'

The Hindu theory of tolerance approaches the question of tolerance from an angle very different to that of most of its European counterparts, and has its obvious strengths and limitations. Although it does not reduce religion to morality, it takes the latter to be central to religion, and makes little philosophical and emotional investment in religious beliefs. If an individual can

5. Al Biruni, an 11th century traveller to India, commented on the Hindus: 'On the whole there is very little disputing about theological topics among themselves; they will never stake their soul and body or their property on religious controversy.' Cited in R.C. Zachner, *Hinduism*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1966, p. 4.

2. This is an influential and frequently invoked metaphor in Hindu thought. It seems to be Jain in origin.

3. *Ekam sat vipra bahudha vadanti*.

4. *Gita*, 4: 11; 9: 22.

lead the good life by holding one set of beliefs rather than another, he is left free to do so.

This partly explains why the Hindu religious tradition has generally been able to live with vast and deep doctrinal differences and avoid sectarian quarrels. Since it expects each individual and social group to lead their own appropriate way of life, it places tolerance at the centre of morality and religion, and avoids the all too familiar monistic disputes about which way of life is the best and should be imposed on others.

**T**he principle of individual uniqueness places stringent limits on what can be done to an individual. Her salvation is her responsibility, her spiritual and psychological needs are different from those of others, and she must work out her salvation at her own pace and in her own way. Any form of coercion violates her 'truth', and is not only immoral but also bound to fail. This partly explains why Hindu sects did not generally compete for followers, and even when they did, they generally left each individual free to decide the matter for himself without being threatened with dire otherworldly sanctions.

The epistemological pluralism, in which the Hindu theory of tolerance is embedded and which gives it its distinct identity and appeal, breeds humility and open-mindedness and creates a climate conducive to inter-religious tolerance. Since it is agent-sensitive, respects differences of insights and needs, and eschews all claims to finality and inerrancy, it encourages respect for other religions and ways of life and nurtures a pluralist ethos. This explains the considerable tolerance Hindus have shown over the centuries to other religions.

Jews, who were persecuted in Christian and treated as second class

citizens in Muslim countries, have lived in peace in many parts of India and enjoyed official patronage, financial support and even a self-governing district of their own in the Hindu kingdom of Cochin. Christians, Muslims and Zoroastrians began to arrive in India from the fifth, ninth and tenth centuries respectively. They were well received and given full freedom of religious belief and practice.

In some parts of India, several Hindu communities have both Hindu and non-Hindu customs for different spheres of life, and see nothing wrong in describing themselves as Muslim Hindus or Christian Hindus. Most Salam Girasia Rajputs traditionally had two names for every member of the community, one Hindu and one Muslim. Some Hindu temples have shrines of both a Hindu God or goddess and a Muslim saint. Hindus widely worship Sai Baba, who was a Muslim saint. India perhaps is one of the very few countries in which public debates between the leaders of different religions were for long a common practice, and in which great religious seekers such as Ramakrishna Paramhansa and others experimented with different religious practices without the slightest inhibition.

**W**hile the Hindu theory of tolerance has these and other strengths, which at least partly account for the considerable tolerance of the Hindu society, it also has its weaknesses, which partly explain the Hindu society's intolerance and periods of inter-religious violence. Its weaknesses arise from the twofold fact that the grounds on which it justifies tolerance are not all mutually consistent, and that they are not as unproblematic and benign as the Hindus like to think.

While the Hindu theory allows its adherents considerable freedom of belief, it tends to be extremely restric-

tive of their freedom of conduct. Hindus are expected to follow the dharma of their caste on pain of social ostracism and, under traditional Hindu kingdoms, of legal sanctions. As the Gita says, 'It is better to die doing one's dharma than to adopt that of another.'<sup>6</sup> This does not mean that individuals can never get out of their castes. They can and, contrary to the Orientalist myth, have done so for centuries.

**O**ne can renounce the world and render oneself casteless; groups of individuals can set up a caste of their own and decide upon its dharma; or isolated individuals or whole castes can raise their status by emulating the rituals and practices of higher castes. Since the first involves renouncing the social world altogether, few are either inclined that way or prepared to pay the price. The second is not much help in the long run because the new caste imposes its own dharma. The third mode of escape has more or less the same outcome, for the dharma of the higher caste exercises the same constraints as those of one's own. It is therefore hardly surprising that despite some degree of social mobility, most Hindus long remained trapped within the caste of their birth.

The combination of an extensive freedom of religious belief and the demand for conformity to social norms creates a paradox which the Hindu theory of tolerance is unable to resolve. The Hindu is free to hold whatever beliefs he likes as long as he observes his caste duties. This raises the question whether he may adopt beliefs that involve rejecting the caste system altogether while remaining a Hindu. The Hindu theory has three answers. It either restricts his freedom of beliefs, or allows him to hold egalitarian beliefs on condition that he does

6. *Swadharme nidhanam shreyah paradharmo bhayavaha.*

- not act on them, or it allows him to live by these beliefs.

The first undermines or at least severely limits its claim to be tolerant; the second creates a hiatus between beliefs and practices and violates the individual's moral integrity; the third is morally and socially most costly because an isolated individual who leaves his caste is cut off from his community and has nowhere to go. Even if the whole caste embraces egalitarian beliefs as has happened sometimes, this has a limited practical value because the higher castes, against whom the equality is asserted, rarely concede the claim.

**A**s for religious pluralism in which Hindus take great pride, it is not at all as benign and egalitarian as it appears.<sup>7</sup> It is hierarchically structured and accommodates differences by grading them on the basis of a distinct vision of human excellence. Although it tolerates a wide variety of sects and ways of life, and consider them best for their followers, it does not grant them equal status and dignity. A sudra's way of life is as good for him as a Brahmin's is for him, but that does not detract from the fact that the latter is supposed to attain higher excellence and to be morally superior. This is equally true of the various form of religious life.

As the Gita says, those of inferior intelligence (*alpamedhasan*) who worship inferior gods receive inferior spiritual rewards.<sup>8</sup> And although there

7. The Hindu pluralist tradition has had many powerful advocates, the most influential being Swami Vivekananda and Mahatma Gandhi. For Vivekananda, pluralism represents India's 'greatest religious contribution' to the world. It has been the 'backbone of our national existence' and has made India 'the glorious land of religious toleration.' *Collected Works*, Advaita Ashram, Calcutta, 1989, Vol. III, pp. 186f. God's book is 'not finished' and there is 'a continuous revelation'; *CW*, Vol. II, p. 372.

8. *Gita*, 7: 23, 9: 25, 3: 25 and 26.

are different ways to attain *moksha*, some such as *jnanayoga* are generally considered the highest and most reliable. It is striking that Raman Maharshi, Aurobindo and many other traditionalists took a low and patronising view of Mahatma Gandhi for taking the messy path of *karmayoga* to achieve his self-proclaimed goal of *moksha*, and were convinced that he was heading for failure.

Hindu pluralism is not only hierarchically structured but is also the basis of a new hierarchy. Hindus are convinced that no religion can exhaust the plenitude of the infinite and that all religions are inherently partial and limited. In their view their religion acknowledges and respects these fundamental truths and was indeed to first to discover them. Other religions ignore these truths. They claim perfection, condemn or take a demeaning view of other religions, and deny their adherents the freedom to borrow from them. For Hindus these religions are therefore inferior. Many Hindu thinkers use religious pluralism to grade all religions, placing themselves at the top and Islam and Christianity, usually the former, at the bottom. Other religions are tolerated and even respected but never accepted as equals.

**H**indu pluralism is further handicapped by what Max Weber called absolute relativisation.<sup>9</sup> For Hindus difference is the central feature of human life as well as its organising principle. Every society is different; within each, castes and social groups are all different, and ultimately all individuals too are unique and different. Since they are all different in their

9. See H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (eds), *From Max Weber*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1948, pp. 149f. For a sensitive discussion of Weber, see Pratap Bhanu Mehta, 'The Ethical Irrationality of the World: Weber and Hindu Ethics', *Critical Horizons* 2(2), 2001.

nature and modes of being, different forms of life are appropriate to them. As we saw, every caste and stage of life has its own appropriate dharma. Every society too has its distinct traditions and ethos, and hence only a particular way of life is appropriate to it. This is also true of each individual to whom only a particular way of life is suited.

This form of pluralism makes it extremely difficult to take an overall view of society and restructure it on the basis of a wider vision of the good life. This may partly explain why utopian thought, a bold and imaginative reconstruction of society inspired by a will to change the world, is largely absent in Hindu thought. Relativised pluralism also freezes society.

**D**ifferent individuals lead different ways of life because these are appropriate to their temperament, moral capacities, stage of life or position in society. While this protects them against others' interferences and ensures their negative freedom, it also severely restricts their choices, denies them the positive freedom to reject their way of life in favour of another, and discourages them from rebelling against the intolerable practices and institutions of their society.

Once we introduce the Hindu theory of karma and *swabhava*, the pluralism becomes even more restrictive. Birth in a particular religious or cultural community is seen not as an accident but as a result of the individual's karma and an expression of his spiritual constitution and needs. There is therefore a strong presumption that the religion of his birth is best suited to him, that it is his natural spiritual home, and that he should live out his life within it. He is, of course, free to borrow the beliefs and practices of another religion, but not in such a way that they violate the substance of his own.

Hindu pluralism is basically a form of peaceful coexistence with other religions in a spirit of relative indifference, each expected to remain confined to its boundary and never to challenge the other's beliefs and practices. It is structurally ill-equipped to encourage a systematic creative or even critical engagement with other religious traditions.

This may explain why few Hindu writers have produced either critical commentaries on or interpreted their own central doctrines from the standpoint of Islam, Christianity or even Sikhism during their centuries of encounter with them. It may also explain why Hindus feel a deep sense of unease and even hostility towards religions making universalist claims and engaging in proselytising activities.

**S**ince these religions neither accept peaceful coexistence nor respect religious boundaries, they challenge the very basis of Hindu pluralism. Historically speaking, Hindus encountered universalist and proselytising religions at three different periods in their history, namely the rise of Buddhism and the arrival of Islam and colonial Christianity. Each provoked much resentment and, when Hindus had the power, considerable intolerance.

The rise of Buddhism is a good example of this. Buddhism was a reaction against the beliefs, practices and rituals of the Brahmanic orthodoxy and, unlike Jainism, it was concerned not just to exist alongside but to challenge the latter and win over its followers. Not surprisingly, it provoked a strong opposition and even some disorder, particularly when it received royal support from Ashoka. This is why Ashoka's edicts had to urge his subjects to 'hear one another's principles', to 'honour another man's sect', and not to fight in the name of religion. Once

the Hindu kings replaced Ashoka's Maurya dynasty, some Hindu leaders took advantage of the royal patronage, harassed the Buddhists, and destroyed some of their monasteries.

**A**nother difficulty with Hindu pluralism lies in its reductionist account of religion. It asserts that all religions are basically concerned with the same thing, have the same goal, worship the same God, and are all so many different paths to the same destination. Their differences are acknowledged but believed to be unimportant, unrelated to the essence of religion, and attributed to ignorance or social and historical circumstances.

Such a view of religion is simplistic and even false. Different religions entertain not only different conceptions but also different concepts of God, and some even dispense with the concept altogether. The Buddhists are agnostics, and the Jains atheists. Brahman, the qualityless cosmic consciousness of the Advaitins and free of all human emotions including love and mercy, has little in common with the quasi-anthropomorphic conceptions of God common to the Hindu dualists and the three Semitic religions. And the latter three again differ greatly in their conceptualisations of God.

Different religions, again, differ greatly in the way they relate God and the universe, define human life and destiny, and imagine salvation. The dominant Hindu idea of moksha has little in common with the popular Hindu and the conventional Christian and Islamic views of salvation. Although all religions do share some moral principles in common, they differ in several others, and define and prioritise the former very differently. Given these and other deep differences, it makes little sense to say that all religions are so many different paths to an identical destination.

Thanks to this reductionist tendency, Hindu thinkers including the most eminent among them have great difficulty appreciating the specificity and integrity of other religious traditions: Hindus tend to think of religion as a spiritual science, and of great religious leaders as spiritual explorers who through yogic training acquired the powers needed to discover the central truths of human existence. Since other religions see their prophets differently, even the most eminent and sensitive Hindu thinkers cannot make much sense of them, and turn them into yogis of one kind or another. Vivekanand's comments on Islam are a good example of this.

The Koran, Vivekananda argues, contains profound spiritual insights but also many superstitions and errors. This was so because, although prophet Muhammad had great spiritual powers and access to divine inspiration, he was not a 'trained yogi' attaining the 'superconscious state' by means of a prolonged spiritual discipline. He was not therefore 'prepared' to cope with the 'hallucinations' to which such a state of consciousness, where normal forms of reasoning do not apply, is vulnerable. Not surprisingly he could not distinguish between genuine spiritual insights and hallucinations, and ended up producing a religion in which great truths lay side by side with naive fantasies about the life in heaven and hell.

**A**lthough Vivekananda was free to reject Muhammad's account of his revelations, it is striking that he simply could not appreciate that Islam took a very different view of divine self-revelation. Aurobindo took a broadly similar view of Islam, and displayed what a critic rightly calls the 'condescending tolerance of an adult for the juvenile follies of a teenager.' Although Gandhi took a reverential view of Jesus, he too thought of him

as a yogi who had arrived at his spiritual insights by intense spiritual training, and could not make sense of the Christian idea of the Son of God. In all these and other cases the assimilationist tendency severely restricts the Hindu religious imagination, and leads both to distortions of other religions and a hurtful attitude of misguided superiority.

**R**eligious pluralism has much to be said for it. For reasons too complex to discuss here, it is a philosophically and morally superior view to religious monism or the claim that a particular religion represents the final word of God. It needs, however, to be based on non-assimilationist grounds. Religions are profoundly different and incommensurable. Each represents a unique vision of the world and God, and nurtures a distinct set of sensibilities, capacities, virtues and values. They are not all paths to the same destination; whatever that may mean, and are not all mutually translatable. It is precisely because they are different that the claim to absolute superiority by any one of them not only cannot be established in a noncircular manner but is also logically incoherent.

Furthermore, since they are different, each can profit from a dialogue with others and appreciate both their uniqueness and commonalities. The dialogue not only uncovers such commonalities as may exist but also creatively develops them, and brings the religions closer in a spirit of mutual respect. Such a non-reductionist pluralism accords full and equal respect to all religions and avoids the arrogance of both religious monism and reductionist pluralism. It also has the further advantage of encouraging each religion to take a relaxed attitude to internal disagreement, fostering internal pluralism, and nurturing the spirit of intra- and inter-religious dialogue.

**I** have so far argued that the Hindu religious and cultural tradition has great resources for tolerance, and that its historical record is just as good as and in some respects better than that of others. I have also argued that it has a deep-seated tendency to freeze differences, to respect them by incorporating them within a hierarchical system, and to take a patronising attitude towards other religions. So long as those involved accept all this, they are tolerated. But if they dare challenge the hierarchy and demand equality of status and respect, as is increasingly being done by lower castes, dalits, non-Brahmanic forms of Hindu religious life and non-Hindu religions, Hindu tolerance is stretched to its limits and throws up to crude or subtle and militant or mild forms of intolerance.

To create a tolerant India, we need to do two things. We obviously need to mobilise the Hindu resources for tolerance. But we also need to acknowledge and face up to its deep-seated tendencies towards intolerance, and subject them to a systematic egalitarian and pluralist critique. This great cultural task was undertaken by a large body of thinkers from Ram Mohan Roy onwards, Gandhi being the last of them.<sup>10</sup>

Although they did much valuable work, it was handicapped by its colonial provenance and understandable religious and cultural biases. We need both to build on and rethink it in the context of contemporary India. The Hindu religious tradition is too stubborn a political fact to be ignored or left to its orthodox and sometimes misguided guardians. And since it has resources for both good and evil, the only sensible course of action is neither to debunk nor to glorify it but to engage with it in a constructively critical spirit.

10. For a critical discussion, see my *Colonialism, Tradition and Reform*, Sage, Delhi, 1989.

# Passion and constraint

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THIS essay examines the problematic and contradictory status of religion in the eyes of the state by looking at the legal attitude to speech involving religion. I want to argue that attitudes to religious speech are fairly stable across a wide range of laws, and are premised on constructing religion as a site of passion and unreason. In Indian law many of the restrictions on religious speech and speech about religion come from provisions in the law. For example Article 295 of the Indian Penal Code, a remnant from colonial times, makes punishable whoever with deliberate and malicious intention of outraging the feelings of any class of citizens attempts to insult the religious beliefs of that class.

There are laws restricting religious speech. Some state enactments, notably in Madhya Pradesh, Orissa and now Tamil Nadu regulate speech whose object is conversion. The use of religious speech is regulated in the context of elections. Under the Representation of People's Act certain kinds of appeals on the basis of religion are deemed to be corrupt practices. Under Art 123(2) any attempt to induce a candidate or elector to believe that he or she will be rendered the object of divine displeasure, the appeal by a candidate to vote for or refrain from voting on ground of a candidate's religion, race, caste or languages, the use of or appeal to reli-

gious symbols, are all instances of corrupt practice.

The difficulty is that the same attitudes to religious speech underlie laws with different intent. For example, as I shall show, the Supreme Court's reasoning in upholding the legality of anti-conversion legislation is exactly the same as that behind a seemingly more secular and benign law, 'The Representation of People's Act' that seeks to exclude appeals to religion from elections. The object is to regulate the appropriate forms of religious expression. It seems to me that legitimate protests against anti-conversion legislation are considerably weakened because even so called 'secularists' share the premises about religious speech that underlie it.

Let us look at conversion first. As is well known, the Supreme Court gave a notoriously contorted ruling in *Rev. Stainslaus v. State of Madhya Pradesh*. This case challenged two state acts that regulate activity aimed at conversion on the grounds that these acts violate Art 25 of the Constitution that specifically mentions the right to propagate religion. The Supreme Court upheld the acts against this challenge. The acts in the *Stainslaus* case did not prohibit all attempts at conversion, only attempts by force, fraud or inducement. But 'force' was defined broadly to include threat of divine punishment or displeasure and inducement to include the offer of

gift or gratification that would include 'intangible benefits'.

The court—in a typically casual fashion—suggested that these acts did not violate the right to propagate religion. It first drew a distinction between attempts to convert from simply transmitting a religion by the exposition of its tenets. The distinction, if one can make any sense of it at all, seems to turn largely on the motive of the speaker. If a person spoke to transmit tenets, he may not be punished, but if he harboured hopes that the person being addressed would accept the truth of his religion and convert, he would not be protected.

In support of its decisions in the Stainslaus case the Supreme Court said that if Article 25—which protects the right to propagate—were to give a right to convert another person to one's own religion that would violate another person's right to religious freedom.

'It has to be remembered that Article 25(1) guarantees freedom of conscience to every citizen, and not merely to the followers of one particular religion, and that in turn postulates that there is no fundamental right to convert another person to one's own religion because if a person purposely undertakes the conversion of another person to his religion, as distinguished from his effort to transmit or spread the tenets of his religion, that would impinge upon the freedom of conscience guaranteed to all citizens of the country alike.'

The court construed the freedom of religion clause simply as the right not to be targeted; conversion by another is objectionable because it conflicts with some conception of what is the proper way for important changes to come about in an individual's life. The freedom of conscience just is the freedom to develop without

any outside influences that cause pain. To have a right to exercise one's religious beliefs just is the right not to have one's sensibility offended, either by speech deemed insulting or being the target of conversion.

But the real premise of the judgment was this. The mere mention of divine displeasure or rewards constituted an attempt to convert by fraud. This is because appeals to such notions impair the capacity of the listener to reason correctly about their own beliefs. The court seems to assume throughout that people are somehow not capable of managing 'religious' ideas they receive, particularly if they are from lower castes. This paternalism runs through the recently enacted Tamil Nadu legislation as well.

Article 123 of the Representation of People's Act prohibits undue influence on voters. Such undue influence includes: threatening a voter with excommunication and causing him to believe that he will become the object of divine displeasure. Such conduct interferes with the free exercise of electoral rights. I want to leave aside the issue of excommunication for the moment and focus on the appeals to divine displeasure.

One difficulty in applying this test is this. How does one distinguish between appeals to divine displeasure from appeals to religion generally? The same difficulty of course arises in the conversion case as well. What if the transmitting of tenets that is allowed, carries the implication that divine displeasure will follow if the tenets are not followed? Surely almost all religious appeals carry the thought that the person being appealed to would be better off if they heed the appeal than if they do not.

The courts have had some difficulty with this question. One clear way of identifying whether a threat of

divine retribution is being exercised is to see if the candidate associates himself with some authority that might be in the position of authoritatively determining when divine displeasure would accrue. As it turns out this has been easier to establish in the case of Sikh candidates than almost any other. I do not have firm proof of this, but my impression is that an overwhelming number of cases tried under the divine displeasure clause have involved *farmans* from the Akal Takht to which candidates had imprudently given their consent.

The most interesting aspect of the ways in which the court construes the threat of divine displeasure clause is this: The courts reason that threatening anyone with divine displeasure puts great pressure on the threatened person and deprives them of the capacity of exercising their rational judgment. In judgment after judgment on this issue, the courts have argued that a suggestion of divine displeasure deprives a person of their abilities to make a choice. In cases like *Ram Dial v. Sant Lal* (1959); *Harcharan Singh v. Sajan Singh* (1985), among others, the court argued that after the leader of a sect had spoken, it practically left the voters with no choice. Religious appeals in this sense are like drugs or alcohol: they impair our capacity to choose.

In some ways this argument is bizarre. The intent of the statute seems to be to exclude certain kinds of religious appeals. There might be good reasons for excluding such appeals. The principal one might be the Hobbesian insight that in order to discharge our obligations to the state faithfully, we have to be relieved of all those sources of authority that induce even more fear in us than the state might. Or one might argue, on Rawlsian grounds, that as a mark of reciprocity,



one ought not to appeal to one's own comprehensive conception of the good in making public arguments.

But in the entire case law concerning the RPA, this rationale is not evident. What is more prominent is the idea that 'religious speech' appeals to the emotions, unleashes uncontrollable passions, and impairs reason. It controls people rather than they controlling it. Whether or not an appeal to divine authority impairs the voters' ability to choose is certainly debatable, but it is neither here nor there. But the fact that the courts frequently refer to it is significant. Why? The logic of this claim is made more apparent in conversion cases: In *Yulitha Hyde v. State of Orissa*, the court wrote: 'Threat of divine displeasure numbs the mental faculty; *more so of an undeveloped mind* and the actions of such a person thereafter, are not free and according to conscience.' In cases involving the Representation of People's Act the same assumption is made throughout.

If this analysis is correct, we can see a fairly stable set of assumptions about citizens that underlie two different domains that require abridging religious speech, whether it is attempts at conversion and the exclusion of religious appeal from elections. The court assumes throughout that citizens are, when it comes to receiving religious speech, or speech about religion, incapable of managing the impressions they receive – to use an old stoic concept:

If the insult is to one's religion, or an exhortation is made in the name of religion, we are incapable of receiving the expression on our own terms; incapable of managing our own responses, condemned to receiving these expressions unfreely and helplessly; incapable as it were of self discipline. We can manage our impressions, exer-

cise our religious choices and practice judgment, only when left alone. Hence the court's emphasis that the right to freedom of religion just means the right to freedom from other people's religion. Our choices are impaired, or faculties numbed, more so because we have undeveloped minds. This is the 'secret' rationale behind both anti-conversion legislation and the RPA.

It is undoubtedly the case that the limitations on missionary activity were initiated to protect Hinduism, but it is legitimized on a deeper set of assumptions concerning citizen capabilities, ones that surface in a wider range of discourses. The displacement onto religion as being, or being uniquely, debilitating of choice, simply masks the various conditions that impair the choice in the first place. And taken together they also point the tensions implicit in the state's attitude toward religion. Religious belief is sufficiently important to warrant protection from having to seriously confront another religion; yet it is irrelevant for public discourse.

I happen to think that both anti-conversion laws and Article 123 of the Representation of People's Act are bad laws. Anti-conversion legislation is illegitimately paternalistic. It sets up the state as an agency that is in the business of saving our souls by putting it in judgment of our motives when we 'choose' our religion. And finally it is an assault on political expression. Such ordinances assume rightly that many conversions are not 'religious' but political or economic. But then that is exactly why conversion needs to be protected. If indeed conversions are political, should not a democracy protect them as legitimate political expressions? Since when can legislatures or courts decide what is the legitimate idiom of political expression?

The Representation of People's Act is associated with a complicated case history that deserves further exploration.<sup>1</sup> One could give a possible Rawlsian rationale for the act in the following terms: public reason requires us to give up appeals to our own comprehensive doctrines; it is therefore legitimate to exclude appeals to religion from politics. But there are two difficulties with this argument. The first is that – as Upendra Baxi has argued in connection with the RPA – excluding religious appeals is a way of saying that a modern state has no political room for questioning its own foundational presuppositions.

The second difficulty is more practical. The RPA has the consequence of putting the court in the difficult position of ascertaining the distinction between a religious and a non-religious appeal. The courts have rightly been criticized, in numerous cases, for letting manifest appeals to religion stand by redefining those appeals as appeals to culture or history. The courts have determined that 'Om' is not a religious symbol; in *Bhairon Singh Shekhawat v. State of Rajasthan*, the courts determined that an election speech promising to build a temple at Ayodhya did not involve an appeal to religion.

The grounds on which the court made the determination are of some philosophical interest. The court reasoned, much as Tom Nagel has argued, that in religious matters one cannot make the distinction between my believing something to be true and it being true. But since the claim that there was a Hindu temple at the site of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya can be historically ascertained, claiming that

1. For a scathing critique see V.S. Rekhi, 'Religion, Politics and Law in Contemporary India', in Robert Baird (ed.), *Religion and Law in Independent India*, Manohar, Delhi, 1993.



it should be rebuilt does not involve an appeal to religion.

Or even more notoriously, in the Hindutva cases the court determined that an appeal to Hindutva was not a religious appeal. I do not want to go into a detailed discussion of these cases, but I hope the following points are clear. The function of the RPA has been to in effect give the courts the authority to decide what is religious and what is not; thereby the courts acquire the authority to regulate the meaning of religion. There was much outrage at Justice Verma's claim in the Hindutva cases that an appeal to Hindutva was not an appeal to religion. Yet very few of the critics went on to ask an even more fundamental question.

**W**hy have the courts acquired the authority to regulate and fix meanings of terms much as Hobbes enjoined his sovereign to do? Why does the practice of Indian constitutionalism require the state not only to promulgate public purposes but also to fix the meanings of religious doctrines? Given that the courts have been using their power to nominally define religious content in a variety of domains, it should not come as a surprise that they chose to interpret Hindutva in a particular way. After all the advantage of nominalism is, as Hobbes argued, that it allows the sovereign to fix the meaning of terms. I suggest that our investments in giving the courts this authority have complicated roots. But acts such as the RPA have put courts in the position of defining our religion for us.

I think RPA is bad law not because I particularly like religious appeals in politics. But it is bad law because it is unenforceable, it cannot be applied without hypocritical contortions, and it focuses on types of speech 'religion' rather than the object of the speech. We already have laws regulating hate speech. The special

emphasis on excluding religious speech represents in our discourse not so much a concern with reciprocity and citizenship, but with a colonial construction of religion as the site of destructive passion.

**B**ut the troubling question I wish to raise for those interested in a public sphere constituted by reciprocity, even 'secular' values, is this. Can we honestly condemn anti-conversion legislation and not reflect over the assumptions that want us to exclude religion from politics. After all, if we do not want to mix religion and politics and if conversion might be political, why not regulate it? If the exchange of religious speech may be governed by logic of passion and hence needs to be excluded from the public sphere as the RPA assumes, why should not the same argument apply to religious exchange in the context of conversion?

It seems that in India both 'secular' and 'non-secular' share the fear of unregulated religious exchange, both share the premise that religion cannot be about rational argument, both share the thought that religion impairs the judgment of individuals and hence needs to be regulated to preserve their autonomy, and both have no compunctions in giving the state powers to regulate religious speech.

The issue for us ought to be whether we are capable of freedom or not. Are we capable of restraining ourselves in the face of religious appeals? Can we confront arguments we receive on our own terms? If we think we cannot, it will be difficult to mount a case against anti-conversion legislation. If we think we can, why have we given the state so much power to define the meaning of our religion for us? Alarming, it is not just the Hindu nationalists who think we are not capable of managing our freedom.

# South Asia and the war on terror

ASHUTOSH VARSHNEY

WHAT have been the implications of the war on terror for South Asia? And what might one expect in the near future? Any student of conflict in South Asia today has to pay attention to these questions. A new era for thinking on conflict has begun.

To be sure, violent conflict, whether inside or between nations, is not always linked to international forces. In my recent book, I have sought to argue that Hindu-Muslim violence in India is primarily domestic.<sup>1</sup> In my view, international factors are not causes of violence; they are at best *sparks*, to which different cities and towns of India react very differently. In some towns, the civic engagement between Hindus and Muslim – in political parties, business associations, organizations of lawyers, teachers and students, NGOs, trade unions, and so on – is so extensive that sparks get extinguished. Tensions and small clashes do take place, but rioting does not.

In contrast, towns where segregation marks civic life, cities where Hindus and Muslims hardly interact, even small sparks – such as rumours about music before mosques, pigs thrown into mosques, cow slaughter, Hindu boys eloping with Muslim girls or vice versa – can become full-blooded fires, razing homes and businesses, taking human lives and causing destruction all around. Riots in segregated towns do not always need the provocation of a torched

train; much smaller triggers have often been responsible for ghastly rioting.

The war on terror is important for this analysis for two reasons. First, terrorists have a vested interest in provoking violence. As a result, more sparks are inevitable and will test India's civic fabric as well as state reaction more often than in recent times. Second, many of these sparks will also be quite intense, for terrorists do not believe in spreading rumours about pigs, cows and music. They seek viciously to attack buildings or personalities of great significance. Their attempt is to provoke outrage and invite retaliation. If Indian citizens fall in their trap – let us say, if Hindus retaliate against India's Muslims for crimes that some Muslim extremists or terrorists commit – the likely outcome will not be the end of terrorism, but its worsening, as in Israel and Palestine.

By definition, suicide bombers do not calculate the value of human life, as ordinary mortals do. The odds that a simple-minded retaliation can work as deterrence – as a way to preempt further acts of terrorism – go down significantly, if costs as high as losing their own lives are irrelevant to an ever-renewing group of human beings.<sup>2</sup> Much more careful thinking about how to attack terror is needed. Such thinking must, among other things, include redesigning intelligence for the new era, cutting off

1. *Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life: Hindus and Muslims in India*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 2002; and Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2002.

2. I develop this argument at length in 'Nationalism, Ethnic Conflict and Rationality', *Perspectives on Politics*, forthcoming in March 2003. *Perspectives on Politics* is a new jour-

finances and communication links of terrorists and their supporters in a way that does not at the same time violate human rights of a whole group of citizens on religious or ethnic grounds, and, most of all, rebuilding *integrated* civil societies, which are more likely to see a spark as something to be extinguished, not something to be fanned further. A crude tit-for-tat, as we saw in Gujarat earlier this year, is simply an invitation to terrorists to strike more often and in a more deadly way. If the awesome might of Israel cannot deter terror, it is unlikely that revenge killings by Hindu nationalists can. Visceral retaliation is entirely unsuited to the new times.

**L**et us now turn to South Asian countries other than India. What has the war of terror done for them? Take Sri Lanka first. The war against terror is beginning to achieve one of its biggest victories on the island of Sri Lanka. Sri Lanka was the first country outside Europe and North America to practice universal franchise democracy – as early as 1931, before India did so in 1947 and before Switzerland in the 1960s. Undermining Sri Lanka's remarkable democratic achievements, a civil war, one of the most brutal and with more fatalities than in Kashmir, has raged since 1983. That civil war appears to be coming to an end. Sri Lanka's government has lifted the ban on the Tamil Tigers, and peace talks have been making substantial strides. While, in the end, peace may still elude Sri Lanka, the prospects for peace have never been brighter.

All available evidence suggests that two recent developments have

nal of the American Political Science Association. March 2003 will be its inaugural issue. Also see the last chapter of Donald Horowitz, *The Deadly Ethnic Riot*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 2000; and Oxford University Press, Delhi, 2002.

been decisive: a new government committed to peace, and the choking of finances and material supplies to the Tamil Tigers. The latter is beyond doubt a result of the laws against financial and material supplies to terrorism, passed by the western governments. The Tamil Tigers have not been able to receive adequate support from the rich Tamil diaspora in the West, making it hard for them to continue their war with Sri Lanka's government.

A couple of points about Sri Lanka are of international significance, but not widely noted. First, while suicide bombing as a form of normal politics was born in the Middle East, it was perfected in Sri Lanka by the Tigers. LTTE's suicide bombs have killed two heads of government in South Asia and a score of cabinet ministers since the 1980s. Moreover, Tamil Tigers are not a Muslim but a Hindu group. Those who far too easily link Islam with terrorism should pay attention. A large part of mainstream opinion, both in the West and in non-Muslim countries, continues to see Islam inextricably linked with terror. That is simply wrong.

**I**f the war against terror has brought long-run peace closer to Sri Lanka, my two other South Asian examples – relating to Kashmir and Afghanistan – show how hard the battle is and how long it might take to realize its principal goals.

In Kashmir, the stakes of the international community are, of course, greater than in Sri Lanka. India and Pakistan are both nuclear weapon states and over 4,000 American soldiers are stationed in Pakistan today. If a war were to break out between India and Pakistan, the odds of a nuclear tit for tat, though small, remain positive. However improbable, a nuclear war scenario must, and will, be closely watched.

Terrorists would ideally want an India-Pakistan war: hence their attacks on India's Parliament, the Kashmir assembly, Hindu temples. If they manage to attack an important building yet again, something symbolically as important as the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon, the threat of an Indo-Pak war would reappear. The key issue really is whether the Pakistan government has fully abandoned its support for terror in Kashmir as an instrument of public policy. Terrorists can operate without government support, but they would be so much weaker if the government did not support them.

**I**n a thoughtful essay, Marin Strmecki, one of the most astute observers of defence matters in Pakistan and Afghanistan and a former advisor to Brzezinski, writes that President Musharraf, as an ally in the war against terror, is 'vital but profoundly flawed'.<sup>3</sup> He is vital, for without his support Washington cannot fully execute its war against Al Qaeda in Pakistan and Afghanistan, and catch the remaining high operatives still hiding in that region. He is profoundly flawed because while he may be against Islamic extremists in Afghanistan and within Pakistan, his Kashmir policy has critically relied on them, and even if he has personally promised to end his support for terror – a commitment he has often made to Washington – he presides over the vast machinery of the ISI. Musharraf's intentions may well be in question;<sup>4</sup> equally important is the role of the ISI as an institution.

Scholars, journalists and observers have repeatedly noted that supporting Islamic terror in Afghanistan and Kashmir has been one of the prin-

3. *National Review*, 1 July 2002.

4. For a remarkable recent editorial on this point, see 'Healing Kashmir', *Washington Post*, 1 December 2002.

cipal functions of the ISI since the 1980s. The entire organization, which continues to be powerful, was schooled and socialized in that tradition and retains many in high organizational position who still support that cause. The threat to peace emanating from Pakistan is only partly due to popular support for the Islamic cause—Islamic extremists have won a significant proportion of the vote in NWFP and Baluchistan only, not in Sind or Punjab. A more serious threat stems from the Islamic extremist influence in the military and intelligence services, and the relative weakness of controls over their behaviour.

What can control their conduct? It seems sensible to argue that a democratic polity is more likely to do so than a military regime, for the latter is committed to Kashmir in a way that civilian politicians, forced to balance all sorts of policy and political goals and constituencies, simply cannot be. Indeed, Pakistan's military appears to have a vested interest in keeping Kashmir burning, for otherwise its rationale for dominance over the civilian wings of Pakistan's polity will disappear. A democratic polity, with civilians in control, may not be a sure agent of peace in Kashmir, but the odds that it will be better than a military-dominated polity must be considered significantly greater.

**S**ince a civilian-dominated polity in Pakistan is nowhere close on the political horizon, the crux of the matter is this: Are Musharraf's support for separatism in Kashmir and his commitment to end Islamic terrorism mutually consistent? What happens in Kashmir will only partly depend on whether New Delhi, or the newly elected state government, behaves better in the valley. Peace in Kashmir will also significantly depend on President Musharraf's conduct.

Therefore, India needs the US to continue to balance its need for Musharraf's support—which is inevitable so long as Al Qaeda fighters are still in Pakistan—with criticism of his conduct and pressure on him to keep his promises. If Musharraf did not badly need the US, this would in fact be an impossible balancing act to perform. Luckily for India, Musharraf's reliance on the US is as great as the US reliance on him. This structure of symbiosis is to be deftly exploited by Indian diplomacy. Without the US to pressure Musharraf, India's options in Kashmir would be much more limited in this age of terror. A pre-9/11 Musharraf would simply be more reckless.

**L**et me finally turn to Afghanistan. In Afghanistan, the problem has increasingly come to be defined as nation building, a necessarily long-run enterprise. In his election campaign, President Bush had spoken against nation building outside American borders as a goal of American foreign policy. 9/11 has radically altered all that. Defeating the Taliban was only one part of the battle; now, through its allies in Afghanistan and an international support network, Washington has to make sure that order is restored, the government functions, and rule of law returns to a land which has not known it for over two decades. America is clearly in Afghanistan for the long haul; and it has to think about the key components of Afghan nation building.

Nothing is arguably more important than the internal ethnic tangle of Afghanistan, which remains delicately poised. The most powerful positions in the current government, with the exception of Hamid Karzai, have gone to the ethnic minority group of Tajiks—to be more precise, to the so-called Panjshiri faction of the

Northern Alliance, whose ramshackle armies and local knowledge were used by the US to defeat the Taliban. To appease the largest ethnic group, the Pashtuns, Karzai was imposed on the Northern Alliance. He appears to have no major domestic base of his own. Many parts of the country are ruled neither by him nor by his government, but by the traditional warlords.

The overall situation thus remains fraught with danger, as the attempts at Karzai's assassination demonstrated. For the extreme scenario still possible, let me yet again turn to Marin Strmecki. 'If the current political imbalances in Kabul radicalize a large segment of the Pashtuns and if Pakistan's ISI (using Pashtun disaffection) organizes an opposition movement; civil war would not be far away.'<sup>5</sup> This would truly be an awkward situation, were it to come true.

**T**o conclude, I have made four larger points in this essay. First, a mindless and brutal retaliation against India's Muslims is more likely to strengthen than defeat terrorism. Second, terrorism in South Asia is not confined to Muslims or Islamic radicals; LTTE is a Hindu force. Third, the US is now involved in nation building in Afghanistan, a difficult and long enterprise, in which victory cannot confidently be predicted and a return to civil war in Afghanistan simply cannot be ruled out. Finally, a less than exemplary commitment by Pakistan to terminating its policy of supporting terror in Kashmir is likely to continue to make peace an elusive goal in Kashmir. A civilian-dominated democratic polity in Pakistan, added to an elected government in Kashmir, is a better bet for peace than either alone.

5. ISIS journal, 6 August 2002.

# Reforming the electoral system

JAGDEEP S. CHHOKAR

THE founding fathers of the newly independent India resolved to constitute the country into a 'democratic republic'. A democracy, according to one definition, is 'the form of government in which the supreme power is vested in the people and exercised by them or by their elected agents under a free electoral system.'<sup>1</sup> The same dictionary describes republic as 'a state in which the supreme power rests in the body of citizens entitled to vote and is exercised by representatives chosen directly or indirectly by them.' Holding periodic elections may give the system of governance in a country the veneer of being a democracy but whether a society is really a democracy or not is determined by how good and how effective the electoral system is. The electoral system is therefore, the very heart of democracy.

The phenomenon most associated with the electoral system is the actual conduct of the election, but the electoral system actually covers a much wider canvas. It determines: Who can or should be allowed to vote? When should electoral rolls be prepared, revised, and how? The formation, functioning (including funding) of political parties is also an integral part of the electoral system. Included is the basic question: Who can contest an election? On what basis is the winner of the election decided is another key element.

These are some of the pre-election and during election activities.

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1. The Random House Dictionary of the English Language, 1976.

There is a separate range of post-election activities during which the outcomes of the electoral process are managed, such as post-election disputes, election petitions, formation of the government, and subsequent functioning of the government including issues such as defections. This illustrative list indicates the critical role of the electoral system in ensuring an effectively functioning democracy.

Another measure of the effectiveness of the functioning of democracy is representativeness, which is reflected in the extent to which the elected representatives *really* represent the will of the electorate. Going by the above criteria, how effective is our democracy? Yes, we do have elections regularly, there is a lot of activity around election time and that is what often leads to India being described as a vibrant and vigorous democracy. However, what happens in the periods between elections, particularly in some of the state legislatures and increasingly in both houses of Parliament, raises serious doubts about even the mere functioning of our governance system.

The cynicism about politics, and particularly politicians, is growing rapidly and more and more people are getting disenchanted with the political process. But putting the *entire* blame on the politicians for all that is wrong overlooks the fact that the political class does not exist or develop in isolation, that it emerges and evolves out of the society. While the political class is largely responsible for the current state of affairs, the society at large,

of which all of us are a part, cannot escape responsibility.

To be fair to politicians, much of the behaviour of the political class can be explained as a logical response to the broader social system within which they have to operate. And the electoral system is a major and immediate part of that broader social system. Consequently, one way to change the behaviour of the political class would be to change the system in which they have to operate and to which they have to respond. That is why the electoral system is the key to effective democracy and needs close attention.

**T**he current election process is governed by the Representation of the People Act 1951. This act was enacted in the afterglow of independence by a group of principled and high-minded people. In their deliberations on the future of the nation, they were influenced by their own idealism and possibly assumed that people with similar ideals would lead the country in the years to come. The Indian genius has certainly evolved over the last 50-plus years, and at least in some ways the sociopolitical milieu of India has changed almost beyond recognition. Some of the assumptions and expectations of the founding fathers of the nation are therefore, and unfortunately, not valid today.

As society and polity evolve, one would expect laws to be modified to respond to the changing circumstances. Although there have been piecemeal and sporadic attempts at tinkering with the electoral system from time to time over the years, particularly when it suited the party in power, it has, by and large, continued as it was envisaged in the RP Act of 1951. There have been a large number of reports and recommendations on what needs to be done to improve the system. Some significant examples

are the Indrajit Gupta Report, the Dinesh Goswami Report, the 170th Report of the Law Commission of India on Electoral Reforms, and the Recommendations of the National Commission to Review the Working of the Constitution (NCRWC) submitted in March 2002. It is noteworthy that hardly any of the recommendations of these learned and painstakingly prepared reports have been implemented.

The general disaffection with the political process seemed to have reached disturbing levels around 1998-99. One of its major causes was the increasing criminalisation of political processes. From the earlier situation where politicians took the help of criminal elements to win elections, using unaccounted money and muscle power provided by them, the situation changed to where criminals themselves started contesting elections and entering the state legislatures and Parliament.

Public awareness about the infirmities of the electoral process, particularly criminalisation, increased. Mass media, both print and audio visual, contributed significantly to heightening this awareness by highlighting the weaknesses of the electoral system. The Law Commission's report submitted in May 1999 was one of the high points of this process. Several civil society groups in different parts of the country initiated activities at improving the electoral processes, particularly reducing the impact of criminality.

**T**he major roadblock in reforming the electoral process are the politicians who have learnt to 'use' the existing electoral system to their advantage and therefore do not want it to change. This roadblock is almost fatal because it is the politicians themselves who are responsible for changing the laws in the

country, including those that govern the electoral process. Two instances of the behaviour of the political class with a gap of 27 years, one in 1975 and the other in 2002, are illustrative of this quagmire.

The best known example of the obduracy of the political establishment till last year was adding Explanation 1 to subsection (1) of Section 77 of the RP Act, 1951. This explanation enabled unaccounted money to be brought into elections by maintaining that expenditure incurred or authorised by anyone other than the candidate, including the political party, and friends and supporters of the candidates, will not be counted as election expenditure of the candidate.

**W**hen the original Section 77 which did not have this explanation came before the Supreme Court for consideration in 1975, the court held that 'a party candidate does not stand apart from his political party... The same proposition must also hold good in case of expenditure incurred by friends and supporters directly in connection with the election of the candidate. This is *the only reasonable interpretation* of the provision which would carry out its object and intent and suppress the mischief and advance the remedy by purifying our election process and ridding it of the pernicious and baneful influence of big money' (italics added).

The political establishment of course did not approve of this. An ordinance was issued soon after the above judgment, inserting Explanation 1 in subsection (1) of Section 77 which clarified that 'any expenditure incurred or authorised in connection with the election of a candidate by a political party or by any other association or body of persons or by any individual (other than the candidate or his election agent) shall not be deemed

to be, and shall not ever be deemed to have been, expenditure in connection with the election incurred or authorised by the candidate or by his election agent for the purpose of this section... In effect the ordinance, which was subsequently passed as an amendment to the RP Act, completely nullified the object and purpose of the Supreme Court judgment and underlying Section 77 (1) read with Section 123 (6) of the Act.

**T**he Supreme Court has reiterated its stand in several subsequent judgments and has also said that since laws have to be made and amended by the Parliament, and the courts can only interpret and implement them, it is for the Parliament to correct this situation by removing Explanation 1. But politicians in Parliament have not considered it worthwhile to rescind the amendment for 27 years now. Why? Because it is convenient and comfortable for the politicians to have a system which can be manipulated. Big money is brought into the elections under the garb of Explanation 1 which, in the opinion of the Supreme Court, has removed even the 'fig leaf to hide the reality' of the impact of big money on the outcome of elections. Big money is contributed by criminal elements who look for favours and paybacks in kind from the politicians after they get elected. Politicians are an active and willing party to the arrangement.

There was an almost exact replay of the above situation last year. An activist group, the Association for Democratic Reforms, filed a public interest litigation in the Delhi High Court in December 1999 requesting the court to direct the Election Commission to collect information about criminal backgrounds of candidates contesting elections to Parliament and the state assemblies, and to make

this information available to voters to enable them to make an informed choice while voting. The Delhi High Court, in its judgement in November 2000, directed the Election Commission to collect, and make this information available to voters, along with the assets possessed by the candidates, his or her spouse and dependent relations, and educational qualifications of the candidate.

Though the direction of the Delhi High Court was only to the Election Commission, the Government of India chose to appeal against the High Court judgment. Political parties such as the Congress and the Samata Party became intervenors to the petition. The Supreme Court pronounced its judgment on 2 May 2002, substantially upholding the Delhi High Court judgement and directing the Election Commission to collect the following information from candidates contesting elections to state assemblies and Parliament in an affidavit to accompany the nomination form: details of past criminal cases – whether convicted, acquitted, or discharged; any pending criminal cases; assets and liabilities (immovable, movable, bank balances, etc.) of the candidate and his/her spouse and dependants; and educational qualifications of the candidate.

**W**hen the Election Commission decided to implement the above judgement by issuing an order on 28 June 2002, the entire political class was up in arms. In an unprecedented show of unanimity, 21 political parties attended an all-party meeting on 8 July 2002, and decided that implementation of the Supreme Court judgment could not be allowed and that the RP Act should be amended to nullify it. The Government of India acted with supreme efficiency and produced a draft bill for amending the RP Act in

7 days. The bill, however, could not be introduced as the functioning of the Parliament was continually disrupted due to what came to be referred as the petrol pump scam; and the Parliament was adjourned.

This did not deter the politicians. The Cabinet decided to get an ordinance issued by the President to prevent implementation of the SC judgment. A group of 26 people from different parts of the country representing more than 20 civil society organisations met the President on 16 August 2002, and urged him to return the ordinance without signing it because some of its provisions were violative of the Constitution. The President did return the ordinance to the Cabinet seeking some clarifications. The Cabinet, however, sent the ordinance back to the President without giving clarifications or making any modifications. In keeping with tradition, the President signed the ordinance on 24 August 2002.

**T**hree PILs have been filed in the Supreme Court challenging the ordinance. At the time of writing, final hearings have been completed and the judgment is awaited. It is worth noting, however, that the ordinance does require a candidate for election to Parliament or state legislature to file an affidavit with his/her nomination paper giving details of criminal convictions and pending criminal cases in which charges have been framed by a court of law. The last requirement, of disclosing *pending* criminal cases, is a step forward because the previous laws provided for disqualification from contesting elections only if a candidate had been *finally* convicted of a criminal offence with imprisonment of two years or more.

Given the way the judicial system operates, final convictions of criminal politicians are almost impos-



sible and therefore the existing law was really not effective. And disclosure of pending criminal cases was what the Association for Democratic Reforms had originally set out to seek. However, several other useful provisions, such as disclosure of financial assets and liabilities, which were stipulated by the Supreme Court have been removed. The ordinance also prohibits asking for any information other than what is allowed under the ordinance that goes against the voters' right to information which is needed to make an informed choice while voting.

The above two examples are ample proof, if proof is needed, that the political establishment, left to itself, will not only not initiate any progressive changes in the electoral system but will resist any such attempts with all its might. The dilemma therefore becomes: How to get the politicians to change the system, which will be better for society but will create significant uncertainties for them?

It seems that the politicians will agree to changes in the electoral system either when they have no other choice or when they are convinced that they will actually lose votes at election time if such changes are not made. The fact that the ordinance to prevent the implementation of the Supreme Court judgment was issued at lightening speed whereas a bill to make very modest changes in the electoral laws including funding of elections, introduced in March 2002,<sup>2</sup> is languishing and is unlikely to see the light of day in a hurry, also point to the same.

Public support for electoral reforms is widespread. A survey by a leading newspaper soon after the Delhi High Court judgment in Nov-

ember 2000, which asked the question, 'Will providing criminal records of aspiring MPs check criminalization of politics?' had 79% of the respondents saying 'Yes'.<sup>3</sup> The response of civil society groups and the media in the aftermath of the Supreme Court judgment was similar.

A large number of civil society groups came together in a loose federation under the label National Coalition for Electoral Reforms, and took several initiatives including requesting the President to return the ordinance without signing it. The response went beyond the national borders of the country. An Internet based appeal to implement the Supreme Court judgment was signed by more than 61,000 people which included a large number of NRIs. People from several walks of life sent in messages expressing their support for reforming the electoral system.

One of the main arguments put forth by politicians against implementation of the Supreme Court judgment of 2 May 2002, has been that the Supreme Court and the Election Commission have transgressed into the legislative arena. In this context, it is important to remember that for a democracy to function effectively, each organ of the state has to perform its assigned role properly. Since it is impractical to expect *all* the constituents of a multiple-component system to function optimally *all* the time, it is necessary to provide checks and balances so that some components compensate for the suboptimal performance of others to ensure that the democratic system continues to perform at acceptable and progressively enhanced levels.

Using this principle of checks and balances, diverse approaches to

electoral reforms have been followed by different civil society groups. These include seeking judicial intervention through public interest litigations for various purposes, using the media to create awareness of the importance of the electoral processes to democratic functioning in the country, and using statutory organs of the state such as the Election Commission and the Law Commission that are somewhat free of political influence due to statutory provisions.

The above approaches have often been used together. The main reason for using them together is that it results in more effective outcomes due to synergy. There has also been networking among several groups leading to concerted campaigns and actions, once again with enhanced results.

It is clear that making even small and incremental changes in the electoral system requires long and sustained effort on the part of civil society, an effort that will invariably be obstructed by the entire political spectrum. But unless civil society decides to fulfil its responsibility to ensure good governance for itself, we may have to continue being in our current state which is best explained by the old Greek saying, 'The price good men will pay for not getting involved is to be governed by bad men.' Just as war is too important to be left to the generals, so is politics too important to be left *only* to the politicians. Concerned citizens must take an active interest in politics without being politicians.

So, what does the stocktaking reveal? The electoral system needs to be reformed, and urgently. It will not be easy to do that as the politicians will resist any change. The civil society in its myriad manifestations will have to work in a sustained manner to achieve any worthwhile change.

2. The Election and Other Related Laws (Amendment) Bill, 2002 (Bill No. 23 of 2002).

3. The Times of India, 3 November 2002.



# In defence of history

ROMILA THAPAR

TO comprehend the present and move towards the future requires an understanding of the past: an understanding that is sensitive, analytical and open to critical enquiry. This was attempted by many Indian historians writing in the last 50 years. Their studies were not only fine examples of historical enquiry but were also pointers to new ways of extending historical methods. They widened and sharpened the intellectual foundations of the discipline of history and enriched the understanding of the Indian nation. These are the studies that have now come under attack, either directly or indirectly, by the agencies of the central government who are busy making a mockery of history. It is because of this assault on history that some of us have to speak in defence of the discipline of history.

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\* Lecture delivered at Thiruvananthapuram on 2 March 2002.

Indian history in the 1960s and '70s moved from being largely a body of information on dynasties and a recital of glorious deeds to a broad based study of social forms. In this there was a focus on religious movements, on patterns of the economy and on cultural articulations. The multiple cultures of India were explored in terms of how they contributed to the making of Indian civilisation. Therefore, many aspects of this multiplicity and its varying cultures—from that of forest dwellers, jhum cultivators, pastoralists, peasants, artisans, to that of merchants, aristocracies and specialists of ritual and belief—all found a place in the mosaic that was gradually being constructed. Identities were not singular but plural and the most meaningful studies were of situations where identities overlapped.

Ten years ago Indian history was moving towards what some scholars have described as almost a historical

renaissance. The writing of Indian historians, ranging over many opinions and interpretations, were read and studied in the world of historical scholarship, not only in India but wherever there was an interest in comparative history. Historical interpretations at this time and in many parts of the world used methods of historical analyses that were derived from a range of theories that attempted to explain and interpret the past.

These included Marxism of various kinds, schools of interdisciplinary research such as the French Annales School, varieties of structuralism and others. Lively debates on the Marxist interpretation of history, for example, led to the rejection of the Asiatic Mode of Production as proposed by Marx, and instead focused on other aspects of Marxist history. There was no uniform reading among Marxists, leading to many stimulating discussions on social and economic history. The ideas of historians other than Marxists, such as Marc Bloch, Fernand Braudel and Henri Pirenne, were included in these discussions. The intention was not to apply theories without questioning them, but to use comparative history to ask searching questions. If those who are currently busy attacking every serious historical interpretation took the trouble to read historiography – the history of historical writing – they might begin to understand what history is all about.

**S**ome of the more obvious examples of these debates relate to varying themes of historical interest. The changing history of caste in Indian society was being studied in detail to ascertain social change and explain social disparities. It was also being viewed in a comparative sense with other systems of social organisation such as those dominated by masters

and slaves as in the Greco-Roman world, or feudal lords and serfs of the medieval world or the more easily recognisable class oriented societies of recent centuries. Historians were asking the same questions that the Buddha had asked when told about Greek society: why do some societies have caste and others have a two-fold division of master and slave. These were questions that were not concerned primarily with making value judgments about caste but with trying to comprehend it as a system of organising society.

The debate on whether or not there was feudalism in India has caught the attention not only of Indian historians but also of many medieval historians in other countries. The categories of feudalism are no longer restricted to a single definition of a feudal mode of production, for many permutations and combinations are recognised and these give new forms to the concept of feudalism.

**T**he historical investigation of the range of ideas that went into shaping Indian nationalism became a testing ground for assessing forms of nationalism in societies other than the Indian. The ideology of nationalism was enquired into and the enquiries ranged from its role in intellectual history to its impact on lesser-known local and popular movements.

New themes came under the purview of historical investigation. Gender history focused on women, not merely as additional players but as primary players and their role in the genesis of some social forms began to be studied. Systems of knowledge came to be examined in terms of their influence on society and their function rather than restricting their history to merely repeating the obvious that these were great advances in knowledge. The formation and definition

of a range of Indian cultures came to include the formulations of culture from communities other than elite groups and this widened the base of social history. It also influenced the extensive study of new religious movements, their beliefs and rituals and their audiences. An interest in the history of the environment suggested fresh hypotheses about the rise and decline of urban centres or the impact of hydraulic changes or deforestation on settlements of various kinds.

**T**his intellectual efflorescence was suddenly sought to be terminated. A blight began ten years ago, culminating in the last two years in an enforced attempt to clamp down on the process of exploring ideas. This has reached the point where the attempt is to denigrate the independent intellectual and to undermine a historical understanding of our society and its past. It has taken a variety of forms. Sometimes it has taken the form of political actions, later it resorted to intervening in and closing institutions connected to academic research, and most recently it has taken to censoring books and textbooks. Each action is orchestrated to a single aim.

The political action that initiated this blight was the tearing down of the Babri Masjid in 1992. This was an attempt to insist that a single culture and a single identity – a Hindu identity, defined not by Hindus in general but by those indulging in the destruction of the Masjid – defines Indian culture. It was a violent, aggressive act of destruction claiming to glorify Hinduism but was a far cry from representing civilised Hindu values. Implicit in this act of destruction was the theory that it drew its legitimacy from history, that it was avenging the destruction of the temple at Somanatha by Mahmud of Ghazni, and thereby setting right a wrong of history.

This fallacious idea that the past can be changed through destroying the surviving heritage from the past was of course a blatant attack on history: for the axiom of history is that the past cannot be changed, but that if we intelligently understand the past, then the present and the future can be changed. The destruction of the heritage of a society, as also happened in the case of the Taliban destroying the images of the Buddha at Bamiyan, is the subordination of past history to present politics. The claim that the past can be annulled is actually a crass attempt to redefine people, their culture and their history. The effort was and is to create a nation moulded not by all-inclusive national aspirations as of the earlier anti-colonial kind, but instead by a narrow nationalism identified with a particular version of a single religion. This makes it easier to impose an ideology of the sort that facilitates political mobilisation and access to power. History is being made a handmaiden to this process.

Once the process comes into being it encourages an appeal to what is projected as a collective memory. Collective memories are not innate and are constructed. As we all know from parallel political movements that have used history in this fashion, such as in Europe in the 1930s, the notion of a collective memory encourages simplistic explanations, single agendas even for explanations of happenings in the past, and preferably a replacing of historical fact with mythology. Collective memory can be a-historical or even anti-historical and is therefore a convenient tool for spreading fallacies.

The Hindutva approach to history ignores all other histories and schools of interpretation. They are all dismissed as Marxist or equivalent. They are then replaced with a reconstruction of the past, based on dubious

evidence and arguments, and which differs from the accepted mainstream history. Hindutva history derives its legitimacy from 19th century colonial history. The periodisation of Indian history maintained by James Mill divides Indian history into the Hindu, Muslim and British periods. Mill's argument and that of many other colonial historians was that the Hindus and Muslims formed two distinct communities and that they were perpetually in conflict.

This has been taken over by the Hindutva ideology in which the enmity of Hindu and Muslim is foundational. It is argued that Hindu civilisation suffered because of Muslim rulers who oppressed the Hindus. This view is propagated despite the fact that some of the most creative forms of Hinduism such as *bhakti* – the religion of devotional worship, and now the most widely practiced form of Hinduism – evolved in South India but became prevalent in North India during the period of Muslim rule. That Mill has been challenged by Indian historians writing in the last 50 years makes not the slightest difference to the Hindutva insistence on supporting the two nation theory.

A major contention is that Hindus were forcibly converted to Islam. This view is based on the claims of the court chroniclers of various sultanates. Some may well have been conversions under pressure. Others such as well-placed families, as for instance of some Rajputs, more frequently converted for reasons of social and political expediency. But the majority of conversions were by caste – *jati* – and these would have been voluntary and in the expectation that Islam held out a better deal of social equality than Hinduism.

There was of course no guarantee that the expectation would be met

and less so where a caste hierarchy was not terminated with conversion. But what is of interest is that where a caste converted, it generally retained its rules of marriage, custom and some rituals and continued to have professional relationships with Hindu castes. When weavers in some North Indian towns converted to Islam, they continued their earlier relationship with Hindu textile merchants. Prior to their conversion they were anyway regarded as low caste and the traders maintained a social distance, and this distance remained.

The issue of conversion that was once a matter of historical debate is now being used politically to threaten Muslims and Christians. Historians have shown repeatedly that conversions did not create a monolithic, uniform community. Those that called themselves Islamic had immense variations not only between the Arabs and the Turks or between the Sunni and Shia'h, but also between Khojas, Bohras, Navayats and Mappilas. These variations enriched the culture of each community and endowed them with varying identities of language, region and custom, identities that frequently intersected with those of other groups in the area. In trying to understand the history of communities, whether Hindu, Muslim or any other, there are many distinctive forms that give multiple identities to such groups. These have evolved from a long process of social negotiation, some of it contentious and some of it convivial. These identities cannot be negated as in the Hindutva interpretations that sweep them all into a single communal entity.

Another aspect of the relations between Hindus and Muslims in the ideology of Hindutva focuses on the Muslim destruction of temples in the past. This is not denied by historians

but attempts are made to try and place such actions in historical perspective. This was not the only activity of Muslim rulers and temple destruction has to be juxtaposed with other undertakings that were not destructive. This is also related to the question of what we chose to recall from the past and reiterate, and what we chose to forget. Destroying a temple was a demonstration of power on the part of invaders, irrespective of whether they were Muslim or Hindu. We chose to forget that there were Hindu kings who destroyed temples, either wilfully as did Harshadeva of Kashmir to acquire the wealth of the temples, or as part of a campaign as in the case of the victorious Paramara raja destroying temples built by the defeated Chaulukya.

**M**y purpose in drawing attention to this is not to add up the scores, but to argue that temple destruction was not merely an act of religious hostility. Temples were certainly places of ritual space and had a religious identity. But royal temples were also statements of power and were surrogate political institutions representing royalty. They were depositories of wealth and centres of finance, they maintained social demarcations through allowing some castes to enter the temple but excluding others, and they were the cultural nucleus of at least the elite groups of a region. Temple destruction and its aftermath, therefore calls for historical explanations of a wide-ranging kind. It cannot be made the justification for destroying or threatening to destroy, mosques and churches in the present day.

In order to assert the superiority and antiquity of the Hindu community as the indigenous and earliest inhabitants of India, the theory of Aryan identity is being revived but in a curious way. Max Mueller had argued in the 19th century that the Aryans were

the foundation of Indian civilisation and that they came from Central Asia. The first part of Max Mueller's argument has been adopted by Hindutva ideologues and the second part has been stood on its head. The Aryans are said to be the foundation of Indian civilisation but at the same time they are said to be indigenous. They are now being equated with the authors of the Indus civilisation, even though the Indus civilisation was pre-Aryan. It was a mercantile culture focusing on many cities and artisanal production and trade, whereas the Vedic corpus depicts a cattle-keeping society unfamiliar with urban culture. The Vedic corpus is rich in its depiction of an agro-pastoral culture, but this is in no way the same as the urban sophistication of the Indus cities.

**T**he British Theosophist, Col. Olcott, associated with Mde. Blavatsky, was the first to argue in the 19th century, as do the Hindutva ideologues now, that the Aryans of India were not only indigenous but were the fountainhead of world civilisation, and that all the achievements of human society had their origins in India and travelled out from India. Vedic Sanskrit was the mother language of all languages and this reverses the argument of Sanskrit being descended from Indo-European. The thesis of indigenous Aryans also dismisses the argument of Jyotiba Phule and the Dalits that the Aryans were alien upper castes who oppressed the lower castes of Indian society. Caste Hindus according to the Hindutva theory have a lineal descent from the Aryans. This descent is also sought to be established by arguing that the authors of the *Rigveda* were the builders of the Harappan cities. Further that only the Hindus can legitimately call themselves indigenous for Muslims and Christians are foreigners.

The intention of Hindutva history is to support the vision of its founding fathers – Savarkar and Golwalkar – and to project the beginnings of Indian history as authored by indigenous Aryans. This contradicts the archaeological and the linguistic evidence of the Indo-Aryan speakers – but then who cares for evidence when a political message becomes the function of history. This theory ignores all the other societies, some of which were speaking Dravidian and Munda, of which there are traces in Vedic Sanskrit. It ignores the widely accepted argument among historians today that the concept of Aryan is not an exclusive, racial identity, but the social evolution of a group incorporating linguistic, cultural and ritual features, brought in by migrants from across the Indo-Iranian borderlands.

**D**esperate attempts are being made to prove that the Vedic people and the Harappans were identical. The linguistic evidence is ignored, particularly the presence of Dravidian and Munda, and only Sanskrit receives attention. The reading of archaeological evidence is forced to the point of supporting the equation of Harappan with Vedic, even if Harappan onagers have to be identified as the horses of the Vedic *ashvamedha*. Contrary to the evidence so far excavated, there is an insistence that the origins of the Indus civilisation be located on the banks of what some identify as the Sarasvati river. This would allow it to be called the Sarasvati civilisation, further evoking a Vedic source.

A history having been invented, the next question is how it is to be implemented? It is being implemented at two levels. One is the level of projecting this kind of history through research institutions and the other is through the school curriculum. It has taken on the dimensions of a

campaign with the full involvement of the agencies of the Human Resource Development Ministry.

Research centres have now been staffed with those who have an ideological commitment to Hindutva history. The Council and supervisory positions in the Indian Council for Historical Research in Delhi and their research projects are also oriented to the same kind of history. Among the new members they tried to appoint an engineer in the guise of a historian to replace an established historian of early India who was critical of their changes. The public outcry against this appointment where doubts were raised about his academic credentials and his bigoted writing against Christians and Muslims, led to his being dropped. Such an appointment gives no credibility to the Council.

**W**hereas earlier the ICHR used to finance a variety of historical organisations, attempts are now being made to exclude those that support secular history which is dismissed by the ICHR as being left-wing history. The IIAS in Shimla now has research projects that focus on ancient Hindu civilisation and more particularly Vedic culture, other aspects of history receiving far less attention.

These interventions by the ministry have been politicised by statements to the effect that earlier these institutions were under the control of left-wing academics so now it is the turn of the right-wing academics. If the debate is formulated in terms of leftist and rightist historians then each time the party in power changes, the curriculum and the syllabus will also have to change. History is not a shuttlecock that can be thrown back and forth in accordance with the views of governments. It also means that since procedures are not being observed, not only the curriculum but also the

research programmes will change. And this is precisely what has happened.

Excuse after excuse is made to prevent the publication of certain volumes of documents already in the press, as part of the project entitled, 'Towards Freedom'. It was first said that they had not been properly edited, then that there were no indexes, and now they have to be cleared by yet another committee although they have already been cleared. A source quoted from the ICHR states that the real reason was to prevent the publication of documents which make it apparent that the Hindu Mahasabha was collaborating with the British.

Procedures of functioning as they have been laid down and followed earlier, should continue to be followed. There is also a need for respecting the professional training in a discipline and ensuring that professionally trained people are appointed to the agencies that determine education. Is it just a coincidence that in educational institutions including the NCERT, recent appointments are said to be of RSS party cadres?

**T**he other action relating to institutions is of course even more high-handed. It takes the form of arbitrarily shutting down institutions of research as and when the government wishes to do so. An example of this is the sudden closing of the Kerala Council of Historical Research six months after it was founded. This is particularly unacceptable given the fact that there has been a growing interest in regional history and the historians working on Kerala have been active in developing research activities. [This decision was reversed through a judgment of the court.] Recently the BJP in Madhya Pradesh has attacked the scientific programmes of Eklavya, an educational NGO that produces school level books on the sciences and social sciences,

and it is to be closed. For all its claims to endorsing secularism, the Congress Party in practice, seems to be sympathetic to the Sangh Parivar. If these closures become a pattern it will be disastrous for research and for a secular investment in Indian society.

**S**hutting down an institution is a sign of extreme insecurity on the part of those who do so. By way of contrast, even though the ICHR is now manned by those who are sympathetic to Hindutva history, the rest of us as historians are not demanding the closing of the Council but are trying to point out that it should include historians reflecting a wider range of views. Given that there are attempts to substitute mainstream history with propaganda, it is all the more necessary to have independent bodies to counteract the hegemony of the propaganda.

To argue that Marxist historians when placed in charge of institutions bring about a hijacking of history to left-wing ideology, is a view resulting from an unfamiliarity with Indian historical research of the last 50 years. The most wide-ranging debate on pre-modern Indian history has been the debate on whether or not there had been feudalism in India. D.D. Kosambi's understanding of feudalism deviated from the model of the strictly Marxist feudal mode of production. Many of us were inspired by Kosambi's work, yet the histories we have written don't necessarily follow only his line of thought.

The major critiques of the feudal mode were initiated by Marxist historians and were later added to by non-Marxists. What resulted from this debate has been the exploration of many areas of Indian history in terms of the nature of the state, polity, economy and religion that have given us immense insights into our past. Some of the universities and research

institutions in Bengal funded by the Left Front government have worked on Marxist analyses of history, but have also published equally thought provoking critiques.

The confrontation among historians today is not between leftist and rightist historians, nor over establishing a Marxist view of history, as is crudely stated by some, but over the right to debate interpretations of history. There cannot be a single, definitive, official history. Such a definition of history is restricted to those for whom being a historian is merely an end to getting a government job. If some of us feel that Hindutva history is less history and more mythology we should have the right to say so, without being called 'intellectual terrorists' and being threatened with arrest and being put down. In the final analysis, history is an intellectual enterprise and does have an intellectual dimension in its understanding of the past, however much Hindutva ideology may try and prevent that.

**B**asic to changing the Hindutva interpretation of history is the attempt to give a single definition to Indian culture the roots of which are said to lie in Vedic foundations. This annuls the notion of a multicultural society. It destroys the sensitive and variant relations that have existed throughout Indian history between dominant cultures and regional cultures. This sensitivity is particularly important today in forging cultural identities that are subcontinental but at the same time incorporate the articulations of the region. These are the demands of a federal or near federal polity.

Let me illustrate this. If the new school curriculum is to consist of what has been recommended by the ministry, children are now going to be taught Vedic Maths, Sanskrit, the glories of Vedic culture, Yoga and conscious-

ness and a mish-mash of subjects under the rubric of Social Studies. This may be well motivated – although I doubt that – but it is inadequate for any exploration of knowledge or of coping with the complexities of our times and our aspirations. Where would a young person go looking for good jobs if all that he or she knows anything about is Vedic culture. Vedic culture is fine in its own place, but it is not a substitute for modern knowledge of various kinds.

**T**hese changes have not been subjected to the normal rules of the ministry, hitherto observed by other governments. So the Central Advisory Board of Education, which is required to meet to discuss and pass any modifications of the curriculum, has not been called, and has therefore not passed the new curriculum framework. Thus the changes take on the character of being illegitimate if the rules of the ministry are still tenable. Nevertheless the ministry and its agencies are going ahead and paying no attention to procedures. Perhaps this is their definition of an effective government. The Supreme Court passed a stay order since the changes have not been approved by the CABE [since vacated].

Let's look at this curriculum in the context of literacy and education. The highest literacy percentages today are in Kerala, Himachal Pradesh and Mizoram – all sustaining very different societies. To what extent should the difference be taken into consideration when drawing up a syllabus? Growing up in Kerala or in Himachal Pradesh have different requirements and some of these have to be conceded.

Kerala has a culture of wet rice cultivation with lineally organised homesteads, of horticulture in the production of pepper and spices, fisheries and maritime trade. Himachal has

none of these. Its villages are nucleated, pastoralism is common and the crops and their cultivation are different. Himachal has religious sects largely drawing on Puranic Hinduism and to a smaller extent populations of Sikhs, Buddhists and Muslims. Kerala has a variant on these and has large populations of Muslims and Christians going back to early times. The language of Kerala, Malayalam, is entirely different from the Punjabi, Dogri and Tibetan of Himachal. Some basic educational demands therefore will also be different and such differences have to be woven into the curriculum.

But what they do have in common are the aspirations that result from education. Schooling and curriculum would need to have some relationship with the local context and ethos and some regional concerns. The question would be how best these can be introduced without denying the importance of national concerns. Educational curriculum has to be such that regional concerns are recognised as an intrinsic part of those that are of national interest. This would ultimately be more viable than forcing everyone to conform to a top-down pattern.

**I**f we agree that we are a society of many cultures then the presence of the many should be registered. This can only be done through centres of research with a regional orientation. This does not mean only the histories of the current dominant communities or castes in a region but a discussion of the interface of the cultures of a region. The danger today is that in an effort to restrict history to that of the upper caste Hindu – as seems to be the game plan of the central government – the richness of the many other cultures will be eliminated. This makes it necessary to have state councils of historical research where the regional

variation can be articulated and at the same time can interface with the national. It also makes it necessary for the curriculum in the states to be worked out in association with the State Councils of Education, Research and Training.

**I**n replacing history with Social Studies we thought that perhaps some of these ideas reflecting the presence of varying cultures would find a place in the syllabus. But the syllabus has no sensitivity to the varying requirements of different parts of the country. The new Social Studies syllabus is a package consisting of some history, economics, civics and geography. For all its modern-sounding jargon, the history syllabus derives from a 19th century, colonially oriented outline of history. It is a body of information rather than a method of critical enquiry about the past. It is substantially a listing of dynastic history and moves away from the kind of history that has in the last 50 years advanced our understanding of the past.

There is no evidence that any academic discussion on history or on the pedagogy of writing textbooks, preceded the drawing up of the syllabus or the writing of the new textbooks. And it is all being done clandestinely in a cloak and dagger fashion. There is a refusal to reveal the names of the authors of the new textbooks nor of any historians that may have been consulted – perhaps no historians were consulted. This is a contrast to the complete transparency that was observed when the previous NCERT textbooks were being drafted and a number of known historians were involved in discussing their content and there were consultations with teachers teaching history in schools. The minister has stated that the heads of various religious organisations would vet the history textbooks, al-

though we are not told who they are. This predicts the kind of narratives we can expect in the textbooks and again challenges the discipline of history.

There is a constant repetition of the aim being to equip students to face challenges with confidence but no mention of familiarising students with systems of knowledge and enquiry. The syllabus remains a heavily North Indian centred one with bits added on indiscriminately from a few other areas. The original syllabus had 15 units on ancient India and three on medieval India. This met with considerable criticism, so virtually overnight the three were increased to 22. Those of us who have worked on syllabuses are amazed that such massive changes can be introduced so quickly, and one wonders whether the exercise is being taken at all seriously.

The Director of the NCERT referred to this massive change as a 'slight modification'. There are now weekly changes being announced and it still remains unclear as to what exactly the final syllabus will be. Yet we are told that the new books will be ready to be prescribed in the coming school session starting in April. This kind of activity suggests a playing around with school education, and this may damage the education of an entire generation of Indian children.

**T**he content of the new syllabus for school History is predictable. The orientation is to focus on the history and values of upper caste Hindus. A few comments on the portions dealing with ancient history will illustrate this. A connection is made between the Harappan civilisation and the Vedic corpus and doubtless in the textbook it will be stated that the authors of the Harappan civilisation and of the Vedas were identical. Vedic culture is taken back to the third millennium BC, a good 1500 years earlier than the gene-

rally accepted date. South India in the Shungam age and the prehistory of North-East India are bundled together in the same unit and one is mystified as to what the connection might be.

Another unit is concerned with the germination of Upanishadic thought and would date to 600 BC. The claim that this was the contribution of India to world philosophy at that time is pure invention. The chronology jumps back and forth through the syllabus and will obviously confuse the student. The Gupta dynasty is described as attempting to unite India, even though it made little impact on the history of the peninsula. The period after Harsha in the 7th century AD is said to be a period of small kingdoms. This is particularly laughable when one thinks of the size of kingdoms at this time and this notion of course echoes the views of British administrator historians of a hundred years ago, such as Vincent Smith.

**S**ome months back a great hue and cry was raised to prepare the ground for replacing the existing NCERT textbooks with new ones. The NCERT, the CBSE and the Ministry of HRD, behaved in a fashion that can only be described as unbecoming to government organisations. It was claimed that a number of statements made in the various existing NCERT textbooks had offended the sentiments of various religious groups. Therefore orders were issued that these passages were to be deleted from the books and further, that their subject matter was not even to be discussed in class with students.

Thus for example, references to the eating of beef by Vedic Aryans or expressing doubt about the historicity of Rama were offensive to the Hindus; a reference to an English source stating that Guru Tegh Bahadur indulged in plunder was offensive to the Sikhs;



not dating Mahavira to remote antiquity was offensive to the Jainas; and that the Jats carried out raids in the countryside of Haryana and Rajasthan was offensive to the Jats.

Most interesting was the order to delete reference to the caste system and the statement that the *varna* scheme was the creation of the brahmins. There is now a ban on discussing the origins and history of caste in schools using the NCERT books. This sounds preposterous, but there it is. There is no intention of discussing the eating of beef in Vedic times or why it is important to provide this information in a book on ancient history. The government decrees what the history is to be, and so it shall be.

**T**his deletion of passages from the books and the ban on discussion raises a number of issues of various kinds, pertaining to the rights of individuals and the ethics of government institutions. It is clearly stated in a distinct clause of the contract signed between the authors of the textbooks and the NCERT that no changes can be made without the permission of the author. The contract therefore has been violated by the NCERT. At a wider level this is also an infringement of copyright. But the government could not care less about having dishonoured a contract and therefore behaved in an unethical fashion.

As for the CBSE decision that these subjects are not to be discussed in class, this undermines the very foundation of an educational system. The purpose of education is to enable a child to explore knowledge and this means giving priority to critical enquiry. Knowledge does not consist of a body of information to be memorised and passed on. That is the concept of education in the sishu mandirs and madrassas and such like. A modern education demands questioning, skep-

ticism and an ability to think independently and to link information.

What then should we think of as the process of ensuring a transition of knowledge that is independent and draws on critical enquiry. It would seem that no dialogue is possible with government agencies. We have therefore to think of alternate strategies.

**A**t one level one would have to work towards establishing councils of historical research in the various states so that regional histories can be treated in a seriously professional manner and not be reduced to being dependent on the patronage of those in power. Historical records are no longer limited to files in state archives. Over the last century the sources of history have been extended to include a vast range of material that tells us about our past. The range, apart from official documents, includes archaeology, linguistics, inscriptions, coins, monuments, documents of professional groups and of private families, and the oral tradition.

This range means that statements about the past have to draw from a multiplicity of records and if they contradict each other this may be the source of a new illumination about authorship and audience. All these records have to be preserved—not just the state archives and gazetteers. This can only be done by state councils, properly organised and financed and carrying out research into and preserving historical material. And it should be the function of these councils to act in dialogue with those responsible for drawing up the history syllabus and curriculum for schools.

At another level it would be required of independent historians to be more involved in the teaching of history in schools—at least in terms of drawing up an alternate and viable syllabus to that of the NCERT, based on

both professional expertise and pedagogy. This would not be an innovation as there are groups that have been doing just this and in some cases their textbooks have been used very effectively in state schools as well as private schools. The example of the Eklavya group comes to mind. Their work will have to be revived and continued despite the assault on them.

Civil society will now have to take the initiative in planning educational centres. The availability of more than a single textbook would provide a challenge to those that are anxious to restrict the writing of textbooks to a single source and thereby control knowledge. If such textbooks, different from those produced by NCERT are reliable, friendly to young readers and cheaply available, such an alternative system might be an excellent outcome of the present crisis. Given the high return on textbook publishing, there might even be a competition among publishers to acquire rights to publishing such books.

**I**n some ways the most serious challenge is the closing down of discussion since it is an attempt to close the mind. This is not a matter that concerns history alone, as it is equally important to all human sciences—be it the humanities, the social sciences or other sciences. This is a frontal attack on knowledge and as professionals engaged in the furtherance of knowledge, it seems to me that we have no choice but to oppose it. The world has moved on since the colonialism of the 19th century and we have come to value independent thinking. There are enough historians in this country that will continue to write independently. There will be enough historical concerns growing out of the multiple cultural aspects of our society, to ensure that the Indian mind is never closed.



# The burden of cricket

DILIP D'SOUZA

TWO young brothers, friends of mine, perfectly nice teenagers. Bright, curious, cheerful, confident types. Obsessed with sports, particularly cricket. Idolize a certain Sachin. All of which makes them much like every other teenager, much as teenagers are meant to be.

But there's one out-of-tune note. Every now and then, they ask me to join them in their small compound for some cricket, just the three of us with a bat and a rubber ball. I'm at the point that I dread saying yes. Because while I go out expecting a session of simply bowling and batting, running around a bit on my creaking legs, what happens is anything but.

We begin with endless arguments about the rules. Is this to be a Test match or a one-dayer? The playing conditions differ, depending. If it's

a one-dayer, how many overs to each side? And in either case, will it be a series or a one-off thing? Since there are three of us, do we play each for himself? Or two against one, in which case who partners with whom? This is a vital concern because I am perceived as either a very weak or a very strong player – I haven't fathomed which, though I suspect the former – and thus one team will be seriously handicapped.

Then we have to decide what constitutes a catch, should we allow one-bounce catches? What about if it bounces off the wall? What about off the wall, then off the ground? And there's the sticky question of runs. One run if it hits the wall on the bounce, two if directly; into the lawn behind the bowler gets no runs, but hitting directly into the lawn means you're

out. Then no one must bowl really fast, though just how fast that means is left vague. Also, you can't hit the ball really hard, though just how hard *that* means is also left vague.

As you can tell, negotiating all this takes forever, even though it was done the previous time we played, and the time before that. And heaven help us all if the little tyke from next door comes out to play, as he usually does. The appearance of a fourth player means a complete revision of the rules, in this case to allow for the patronizing view of the tyke as a cricketing novice. (He isn't).

**S**o while all this gets hammered out, I'm standing there for upwards of 15 minutes, bouncing the ball in my hand, waiting to simply chuck it at a batsman. Any batsman will do. Heck, a bat by itself will do. I'm waiting to simply play. When we finally do, it's with a sort of grim purpose, no quarter given and every ball, every shot, contentiously argued. 'You bowled that one too fast.' 'You hit it too hard.' 'That shot didn't hit the wall, it only hit this pipe on the wall, so you don't get a run.' 'Why not?' 'Don't stand on the pitch.'

For me, the last straw was the time we went to play at dusk. Fun to play in near darkness, or so I thought. Me and the tyke versus the brothers. When we batted, I was startled to hear them actually instructing each other to flight the ball high, so tyke and I would not see it against the inky sky. Thus we would not be able to score. Thus they'd win. (They had batted first, when there was still some light. When, more importantly, tyke and I hadn't thought to float our deliveries dozens of feet into the air). It worked like a charm: I didn't see a single ball as it descended from darkness on high. We didn't score. They won.

They 'won.'

With these two otherwise affectionate souls, it's never just a game, never just simple playing. It's always, something to be won.

**W**hat I'm getting at here, if somewhat long-windedly, is the way we have come to see cricket; and how these two approached our play sessions is a tiny, but just maybe instructive, example. It's our view of the game that produced recent disruptions of more momentous matches than flailing in the compound. And just maybe too, there are connections between that crude crowd behaviour and our pained relationship with Pakistan, our very idea of ourselves as Indians. Tenuous connections, perhaps you think, but let's see.

To a cricket fan who dropped into India for the first time in November 2002, the disruptions of three matches with the West Indies would have come as a mystery. What possessed the baboons in the stands who decided to throw bottles onto the ground, stones at the players? When I tried to answer that question, I wandered into a thicket of questions and thoughts, mulling over all kinds of issues. Now I'm usually wary, when I write, of embarking on hand-wringing about our Indian situation. But to me, these disruptions seemed to say such a lot about us, circa 2002. To me, they were a kind of marker of where we are today.

So really, what possessed the baboons?

It made no sense. True, in the first match, the disruption was triggered by one disastrous over near the end of the game that probably put the West Indians ahead. But even so, overall it had been an entertaining game filled with fine Indian performances. In all three matches, the Indians batted extremely well; in the third, they batted spectacularly. And even if the

West Indies won the first two, they were close, exciting games all the way. The third saw a thrilling West Indies batting display, only for it to be overshadowed by an even more exhilarating show from Ganguly and Sehwag that was taking India inexorably to victory: at the time the match had to be called off, India was so far ahead of the equation as to make a win a mere formality.

So it wasn't that India played badly. Nor were the games dull, oh no. Nor can I really swallow the explanation some papers front-paged after the third game – that betting syndicates, who stood to lose a great deal of money because of the looming Indian win, instigated the disruption.

**O**ne reason for scepticism about the betting explanation is that, under the Duckworth-Lewis rules for interruptions, India was awarded the match. It's too much to expect that the syndicates were unaware of those rules, unaware that the game, if interrupted when it was, would be awarded to India. But more than that, I am terminally suspicious of theories that blame some amorphous, invisible villain for an event – like railway inquiries that pronounce that an accident happened because of 'saboteurs'. Such explanations, it seems to me, only let the guilty – like stone-throwers, like lax railway inspectors, like policemen who should have been watching the crowd and acting swiftly at the first signs of trouble – escape punishment. Let's blame some shadowy match-fixers instead!

No, it doesn't swim. So again, why the stone-throwing?

In the end, there's only one explanation I can come up with. It has to do with the sullen, prickly, hyper-but pseudo-nationalism we have been taught to believe in over the years in India. It has to do with the way we have

drenched cricket, the only sport in which we have truly world-class players. And it has to do with the immense expectations from cricket that such a brand of nationalism breeds in us. You put it all together, and crowd disruption is something that was waiting to happen.

**T**ake the feeling I noticed in my young cricketing friends: the desire to win outstripped any desire to have fun. Cricket has become like that for us Indians. It's not enough to want to see a thrilling game filled with robust athleticism from both sides, for what if India loses? Tension and excitement are not the point, winning is.

When I was following the Kolkata Test against the West Indies with the brothers, I expressed disgust that Indian captain Ganguly chose to play out a draw on the last day instead of declaring and pressing for a result. Sure, the West Indies might have won. But so might India, and the series was already won anyway. In any case, it would have made for far more exciting cricket than the dull draw the players went through the motions to complete. But my anger about the meandering proceedings brought only bewilderment from the pair. Unable to comprehend that I might actually allow for the possibility, they asked in wonder: 'Do you want India to lose?'

No, I didn't want India to lose. But far less did I want to watch meaningless cricket. Whatever the result, even a West Indies victory – if it had come at the end of a swashbuckling day's cricket, I would have applauded it.

After the disrupted Jamshedpur game, a dejected Viv Richards, that swaggering West Indian hero of the game, touched on this very theme in a *Times of India* column:

[D]uring my playing days, Indian crowds had the reputation of loving

their cricket and applauding even visiting players. I have scored a few runs in these parts, and I remember crowds applauding me whenever I reached a personal milestone.

Sadly, the current spectators don't seem to love cricket, only Indian cricketers. I am saddened to note that no one claps when a West Indian reaches a 50 or takes a wicket. One would not have guessed that Sarwan had reached a half-century at Jamshedpur because the crowd simply ignored it.

**H**ow did we turn to this graceless surliness, and what longing for victory demands it? What twisted patriotism demands it? Of course we all want to win. But not only must India win, somehow it has also become patriotic to want India to win above all else. Certainly above such things as applauding a player from the other team – how can a true Indian do that? Deep in your very marrow, you must feel a burning, fervent desire for an Indian cricket victory – or you are not fully Indian. Nor is this a mere opinion from an obscure writer: Indian leaders who style themselves 'staunch' nationalists regularly speak in just such terms about cricket.

Move on to something else about this particular flavour of nationalism. If it rests on anything, it's on the idea that Indians have been ill-treated by the rest of the world, that India never gets its rightful due. Whether colonialism or the great American courtship of Pakistan, whether Mughal rule or our yearning to be on the Security Council: we have been uniquely victimized through history and nobody pays attention to all our righteous claims today.

I don't know how many dreary articles I've read on these lines. Particularly since 9/11, they invariably nurse an injured annoyance that the US has allied with Pakistan in the

famous war on terror. 'Is it not ridiculous,' asks an S.S. Bankeshwar in *Freedom First*, 'that [Bush] should seek the help of Pakistan, the father of Islamic terrorism and the Taliban movement, and the sponsor of Islamic terrorism in Kashmir, to root out global terrorism in the world?'

The subtext here is that the US should have sought the help of India; that we are their natural ally. Our experience with terrorism over the years is just what the US felt after September 11, so why does the US turn away from us? There's an increasing frustration, evident even in Bankeshwar's words, with the behaviour of the US; more generally, with what we see as the world's indifference to our victimhood. Is there any country that has suffered as much from terrorism as we have?

**B**esides irritation that the world takes no note of our suffering and aspirations, we routinely hold outsiders responsible for everything that's wrong in India. One Rajeev Srinivasan once put it this way a few years ago on rediff.com: 'The external factors in India's case have been crucial: As a result of invasions, our cultural fabric has been damaged; the self-sufficient village economy of old has been utterly destroyed; and through outright theft of capital, we have been impoverished beyond measure. It is at best naive and at worst criminal to ignore these ground realities: foreigners have not been good for India.'

Those scheming foreigners!

For all they have done to us, we are sure, the world owes us one. Or three. And since they show no signs of paying up, we'll throw things at them. Or at least, 'them' as embodied in overseas cricket players. Let them suffer the slings and arrows and water-bottles of our outraged sensibilities.

Nor need it stop there. The West Indians have even been castigated for 'overreacting' to being hit. Naturally. Niranjan Shah, President of the Saurashtra Cricket Association and thus in charge of the abandoned match at Rajkot, expressed astonishment that 'a stray bottle thrown at a player can lead to the game being aborted... [the West Indians] should have taken the stray incident in their stride.' Even ex-cricketers – who surely should know better – jumped on the blame-the-West Indians bandwagon. '[Y]ou can't get seriously injured by a glass bottle,' said Navjyot Sidhu. As if we should explore what will indeed seriously injure a player. Yes, what's a mere bottle chucked here and there?

Niranjan Shah managed to take this exercise in blaming the victim a step further still. The West Indian (over)reaction, he said, would 'provoke more such incidents in the future because the crowds would know one bottle can sabotage a match.'

**Y**ou see, not only must the West Indians have things thrown at them, not only must they be blamed for overreacting, but they have been warned: even before it happens, any further violence is already their fault.

Again, Viv Richards put his finger on the truth. 'As far as I am concerned,' he wrote in the *Times of India* on November 15, 'accusing us of over-reaction is merely an attempt by certain officials to defend their turf after failing to provide adequate security.'

But who will listen to Richards? After all, if we blame the foreigner for every Indian ill, there's a smooth transition from there to blaming him for making us throw stuff at him. Really, what's a mere bottle thrown at these people? Why should they complain if it hits them, these fellows who 'have not been good for India?'

Richards made a point that I passed over above: that our spectators 'don't seem to love cricket, only Indian cricketers.' Now that, I think he's got wrong. When we weigh them down with our burden of hopes and expectations, when we can interest ourselves only in their victories, when we disrupt matches – I wonder, is this love for Indian cricketers? What brand of love calls for flinging things at opposing players?

No, this is just sullen thuggery wrapped in phony nationalism, garnished with the equally phony bow of 'love' for our cricketers and their game.

**A**nd the final ingredient in this tawdry cocktail of cricket and nationalism is, of course and always, Pakistan. Pakistan, the country we love to despise; whose presence to our west, we think, looms like a dismal nightmare over all our ideas about ourselves. Every facet of our cricketing emotion is magnified several-fold when we play Pakistan; is magnified precisely because it is Pakistan. Is there an Indian cricket fan who does not know, and quails as he remembers, that Javed Miandad once hit a six off the last ball to beat India; to plunge a country into doubt about its very soul?

Which is why Miandad's last cricket match for Pakistan was another marker of sorts.

Bangalore, the 1996 World Cup quarterfinal between India and Pakistan. Not surprisingly – given the occasion, the stakes and the traditional tensions of a game between two deadly rivals – this was another match in which the crowd threw stuff at players. (Violence erupted at our next match as well, the semifinal in Kolkata that was abandoned and awarded to Sri Lanka). As India, batting first, neared the end of its innings, Ajay Jadeja began a spectacular assault on

Waqar Younis. The raining fours and sixes sent the crowd into such delirium that they flung things at the Pakistanis fielding near the boundary. Of course.

**B**ut the telling moment came during the Pakistani innings, when Miandad, an aging shadow of his six-hitting self, was out. In 'War Minus The Shooting', his provocative account of that World Cup, Mike Marqusee writes of Miandad walking off:

The flags waved as never before. At last, the man who hit the six heard round the world had got his comeuppance, and [the crowd] offered no applause (some even booed) as one of the greats of modern batsmanship exited the international stage. [They] were consumed with vindictive glee at the fall of an ancient enemy. Nationalism had drowned out sentiment. In the clubhouse, Ram [Guha, the cricket historian] rose, alone, to cheer him. 'What are you clapping for?' the man in the seat next to him demanded. 'You should applaud him too,' Ram answered, 'he is a truly great player and none of us shall ever see him again.' The reply was terse and put an end to the conversation: 'Thank God I shall never see the bastard again.'

How did we come to this graceless surliness? On at least one recent evening I found myself wondering, as I flailed blindly with my bat, if it has distant roots in balls that fall through the night air.

'All cricket contests carry a burden of meanings imposed by events outside the field of play,' muses Marqusee. 'But [Miandad's final match] carried more than its fair share.'

Like that Bangalore match, the Jamshedpur, Nagpur and Rajkot disruptions carried burdens too. How will we bear them?

# The millennial folly

SAILENDRA NATH GHOSH

THE Vajpayee government's resolve to link up all major rivers of the country, if acted upon, will go down in history as *the* millennial folly. This is because it defies all ecological, politico-economic and human cost considerations and its dimensions are unprecedentedly massive. Nowhere in the world has there ever been a project of this magnitude and complexity.

The prime minister and the parliamentarians who greeted his announcement with éclat probably think that if there can be a network of roadways, why not a network of rivers as well. This reflects lack of thinking about the characteristics of the country's basic resources – soils, rivers, estuaries, mountains and forests and the peculiarities of the climatic conditions as also their interactions.

No doubt, Sir Arthur Cotton, who had originally conceived the idea of networking the rivers for inland navigation and K.L. Rao, who revived the idea in the eighties for purposes

of irrigation and power, were both world-class engineers. But engineers often fail to perceive the wider issues involved.

Before coming to a decision, the government ought to have addressed itself to a few crucial questions: Which are the water-surplus areas of the country? Except for the Brahmaputra basin in North East India, is there any area which is really water surplus? Do not the Ganga water-fed states, which get flooded during the rainy season, suffer from water scarcity during the dry season? What are the basic reasons for the alternating phenomena of flooding and scarcity?

How correct is the prevailing concept of irrigation? Except paddy and sugarcane, is any other crop high in water demand? Do not the other crops require just moisture, as distinct from flow irrigation? Is not irrigation, beyond the very frugal, ruinous to soil? Is the practice of cultivating rice after rice in the same year not an invitation to long term salinity and barrenness?

Neither Karnataka, nor Tamil Nadu, nor Andhra Pradesh are so deficient in rainfall as Rajasthan or Gujarat. Nevertheless, why is the demand for importing water from another region more vociferous there? Is it not due to the cropping patterns of their large landholders whose only concern is money profits at the cost of the health of their soils? Since the drought affected state of Rajasthan will not be a beneficiary of the link-up, will it have to be treated as a hopeless case? Have we cared to assess the impact of flow irrigation from the Indira Gandhi Canal on the soils of Rajasthan? Although we take pride in the green it has produced, are we not simultaneously experiencing an increase in salinity in this arid region's soils which will hurt us for centuries to come?

**W**hile we talk of linking up all major rivers, how will we link up the Brahmaputra with the Ganga in the face of Bangladesh's refusal to allow the digging of a link canal through its territory? If we want to achieve the link-up of these two mighty rivers only through India's territorial space, what are the formidable technological challenges involved and their cost implications? Have not East Bihar and West Bengal been complaining about insufficient water supply from the Ganga? Will not this project aggravate their sense of grievance and accentuate inter-state conflicts? Will not Bangladesh, a riparian state, take the issue of attenuated supply to the international fora? Can we unilaterally abrogate the India-Bangladesh Treaty of December 1996 on the sharing of Ganga waters, under which India had undertaken to protect the flows at Farakka, which is the sharing point?

Will not the networking mean a flow of pollutants from higher gradients to cause distress to lower levels?

Have there been such spells of successive four or five years of drought in peninsular India that the problem cannot be faced without importing the glacial waters of the Himalaya? And, if this is indeed the case, how will they and the rest of India face the situation in future, in the context of the now receding snowlines of the Himalaya?

**T**he government has for long been talking about basin-wise development programmes. Does not this scheme conflict with that approach? While the country is now tending to accept the concept of *local jal swaraj* – the concept that decentralised methods of water harvesting can meet all legitimate water demands – does not this grandiose scheme directly militate against the new awareness?

There are yet deeper questions. Sadly, neither the Union government nor any state government provides any indication of having addressed even the above obvious questions. And our populist politicians in the different states have developed a peculiar mindset. They think their job is to get more and more water from wherever they can to enable its use by the locals for immediate gain whatever the longterm consequences. That over-irrigation condemned Mesopotamia in West Asia, once the cradle of civilization, to barrenness for the last three thousand years, does not deter them. Few care to remember that the districts of Layalpur, Montgomery and Sargoda (now in Pakistan), which were, half a century back, the showpieces of irrigation-induced prosperity, are now suffering from low productivity and having to fight the scourge of salinity.

In our own country, the water-logging and soil salinity that we have been experiencing in the Bhakra canal command area in Punjab and in the Sardar Sahayak canal command area

in U.P. tell the same story. (These are the sad facts which Justice B.N. Kirpal missed in the judgment in the Sardar Sarovar Dam height case, where he waxed eloquent on Punjab's irrigation induced prosperity.) Some years back, the FAO estimated that nearly 50 per cent of the world's irrigated areas had become saline. But the internationally recognised authority and highly respected soil scientist, Professor Kovda, who passed away a decade back, had placed the estimate at 80 per cent. The estimates varied because of the nature of irrigation under observation (flow irrigation, or tubewell or borewell irrigation) and the duration of the observation.

Deeper questions of ecology always get bypassed in our country. We rarely try to fathom the various functions of a river – that its functions are (i) to carry the salts and toxins from the basin to the sea; (ii) to supply sweet water to the estuaries so that the intermingling of sweet and salt water may cause a welling up to celebrate the emergence of new lives by invigorating the reproduction spree of aquatic animals – fish, sea fowls, crabs, oysters etc; (iii) to maintain the hydrologic cycle; (iv) to carry detritus to the oceanic phytoplanktons to enable them to release the major portion of the globe's oxygen to support aerobic life. We can impede these functions only at our peril.

**A**lso the fact needs to be grasped that each river's water properties are different from those of every other river, depending on the characteristics of its source, its catchment area and the basin as a whole. The difference of water properties lies not only in their hardness or softness but also mineral content, extent of aeration, transparency, electro-chemical properties, and healing power. On these distinctive properties depend the kind of aquatic

species they nurture, the varieties of insects and birds that hover over their water surface and nestle on their banks.

The hilsa fish that the Ganga water helps spawn is peculiarly its own. Dolphins are seen in only a few rivers—that too, of differing varieties. The differences in varieties of birds and insects river-wise are also considerable. This biodiversity is important. What value which underwater or above-water species has for maintaining the web of life or for mankind's own welfare, nobody knows. Limited study has been done on these aspects, river-segment-wise. In the USA, when the large Tellico Dam was nearing completion, despite colossal expenditure, the courts ordered the abandonment of the project simply because the river was home to the small dart fish not present anywhere else. If our major rivers are interconnected, many species of life will disappear and many varieties within each species of fish, molluscs, insects, birds and other animals will become extinct. The loss will be irretrievable.

**L**et us now take a look at some already revealed aspects. R.K. Murthy, a retired engineer of the Neyveli Lignite Corporation, has revealed that during Indira Gandhi's time the project was seriously discussed and given up because of formidable geographic-technological hurdles and mind-boggling costs.

'At Patna, which is the only point along the course with a divertible surplus, the Ganga flows 200 ft. above the mean sea level (MSL). If it has to be linked with any river in the peninsula, the water has to be raised over the Vindhyan chain — i.e. to 2860 ft. above MSL. Pumping 20,000 cusecs of water to that height would have required the entire day's power generated in the country at that time.' The

requirement was estimated at 90,000 MW of electric power.

Assuming that the scheme has now been so modified that instead of lifting the water over the Vindhyan heights the waterway is lengthened to circumnavigate the mountain ranges, even then the costs will be unbearably high. Reportedly, the rough figure that was mentioned before the Supreme Court is a mind-boggling Rs 5,60,000 crore. No agency anywhere in the world would even look at this project for funding.

**T**he modified plan which seeks to get Brahmaputra water for the Ganga from Manas in Arunachal Pradesh and to redirect the flow of the Ganga-Mahanadi link from the West/North East to South East (by gravity) and South of the mountains, and the flow of the Mahanadi-Godavari link from the East to South-West/South (by gravity) may look nice on paper. One has to exclaim in Shakespearean language, 'There are many things in heaven and earth, Mr River-Diversion Engineer, than are dreamt of in your philosophy.'

These engineers would be advised to remember the fate of the erstwhile Soviet Union's plan to divert the snowmelts of Siberian rivers to feed the rivers of Central Asian republics. The experiment failed miserably as salt water incursion and other forms of ecological disaster occurred wherever the canal came up and the scheme had to be abandoned in the 1980s. The experience in California (USA) of interlinking two rivers, too, proved deleterious. It caused huge salt build-up. Besides, by preventing the water from reaching the ocean, it seriously affected coastal ecology.

Let us suppose for a moment that despite the enormous risks, the country decides to take up the interlinking project. The cost in terms of human

displacement will, in that case, be terrible. In the words of C. Rammanohar Reddy: 'The construction of barrages and excavation of thousands of kilometres of canals will make villages disappear, flood towns, and cut through millions of hectares of agricultural lands. It will uproot millions, the number exceeding the population shifts of Partition.'

There is yet another kind of cost. Many rivers have already become open sewers. In the new set-up, pollution control will be even more difficult. Hence larger segments of many more rivers will turn into drains.

Evidently, the inter-state conflict over Cauvery water has revived interest in the interlinking project. But the conflict was caused by the twin evils of unsound cropping practices and the disuse of traditional and highly efficacious rain water harvesting systems. The large landholders of the Thanjavur delta in Tamil Nadu keep insisting on three crops of water intensive paddy for short term commercial gains. In Karnataka, the farmers of Mandya have been cultivating sugarcane, a water intensive cash crop, in the name of protecting their agricultural right.

**T**hese practices are comparable to the other distortion — namely, the cultivation of paddy, the highest water-demanding crop, in the scanty rainfall area of Punjab, and the cultivation of sugarcane on a large scale in Maharashtra. Before our very eyes, India's fertile soils are marching towards salination. The Union and the state governments are presiding over this march towards ruination. Now, they are going further ahead into succumbing to the myopic large farmers' demand for connecting the rivers so that the latter can grow more cash crops unsuited to their soils. Somebody will have to write a new *Mahabharata* of

our blind kings acquiescing in the conversion of this once fertile country into a vast wasteland.

I.C. Mahapatra, a noted agronomist, has suggested an alternative crop pattern for Karnataka and Tamil Nadu requiring minimal water. It will save their soil and possibly yield them higher income as well as create a better nutritional status for the people.

'In non-irrigated (rainfed) areas, Karnataka can go in for ragi, jowar, bajra, horsegram, redgram, groundnut, castor and coconut. In irrigated conditions, it can choose from sugarcane, maize, brinjal, chillies, mulberry, tomato, potato, turmeric, ginger, grapes, banana and betel. In Tamil Nadu, 62 per cent of the river basin grows rice thrice – *kuruvai*, *thaladi*, and *samba*. Our study shows that a single crop of *samba* variety will give far higher yield than *thaladi* or *kuruvai* crops. Apart from rice, the state should opt for ragi, groundnut, sesame, castor, blackgram, greengram, sugarcane and cotton.' (*Down to Earth*, 15 November 2002).

**T**here is no point in engaging in grandiose projects inviting bankruptcy while continuing to kill the preexisting rainwater harvesting structures whose efficacy was acknowledged the highest in the world. Today, in Karnataka, 'at least 11,000 traditional water harvesting structures such as tanks and ponds have silted up and dried, as the local farming communities, which maintained and used them, have stopped doing so.' In Tamil Nadu, there had been wonderful 'Eries' in large numbers whose efficiency were the marvels of the world's experts. These are now suffering neglect. Besides, Tamil Nadu has been destroying the potential of some of its rivers by sand quarrying. The sorry spectacle of the Qoom river running as an open sewer in the city of Chennai

itself shows how it has been taking care of its own water resources.

Whether in Tamil Nadu, Karnataka or Kutch, there is no need for a big project for water. According to India's eminent meteorologist, P.R. Pisharoty, who passed away three months back, 'If the rainfall over the area is merely 50 cm per year, then all the water requirements can be met by local rainwater harvesting techniques.'

**A** number of recent experiments in the arid zones of Rajasthan and several other states have conclusively proved that local water harvesting techniques can meet all legitimate needs. But big project oriented engineers tend to play down their potential. They seem to have succeeded in brainwashing the present rulers. The 'Link the Rivers' project is virtual repudiation of the decentralised water harvesting technologies. It is also the denial of the potential of percolation tanks which, if resurrected, can help cope with successive years of drought by preserving water in the underground, in evaporation-free condition. It is also a disavowal of the government's own advocacy hitherto for conjunctive storage of water. Plainly, this is surrender to the clamour of large landholders who seek to cultivate a series of high water demanding crops to the detriment of their soils, in their short term interest of money profits.

The fundamental problem of India's water resource is the Himalayan snow fed rivers' rate of siltation, which is highest in the world. Because of this the raised beds of the rivers are unable to hold enough water. This maximises the wasteful runoff to the sea, causes floods during the rains and water shortage during the dry season. The primary task, therefore, is to desilt and deepen the rivers, re-excavate the

canals, reforest the Himalaya and all other mountain ranges and hills, and reforest both sides of the banks from their source to the deltas. These basic tasks will get sidetracked by the grandiose project of linking up the rivers.

The government must first study (i) which crops are suitable – or otherwise – for specific climatic conditions; (ii) which combination of crops, including coarse cereals, pulses and oilseeds, is most suitable for nutritional needs; and (iii) which kind of irrigation and/or drainage is suitable thereof.

While noise is being made about great navigation opportunities to be provided by the inland water grid, not even the first step has been taken for encouraging large-scale boat movement in the existing inland waterways to carry cargo. The water-driven crafts are known to be the cheapest mode of transportation. Sane thinking will also suggest that oil slick spreading vessels ought not to be permitted in the inland waterways in the interest of maintaining purity of water and preserving aquatic life.

**S**o far as the lure of electricity is concerned, the first thing that needs to be laid down is that electricity supply for the burgeoning industries or landed estates is counterproductive unless *foolproof measures are first taken* to see that no untreated or half-treated effluents/sludge is unloaded in the rivers. For these are the agencies which have been converting the rivers into open sewers.

In view of the ecological, economic and human costs and the likely negative consequences of the project, as narrated above, the government would be well advised to retreat from this Tughlaqian project. And the Supreme Court, in its wisdom, may possibly review its own order, *suo motu*, in the country's interest.



# Making a difference

VALMIK THAPAR

THE forests and wildlife of India suffered the greatest neglect from 1990 under Congress rule and in the tenure of Narasimha Rao. The Gandhi years were over and the Congress party without the Gandhi's had no time for India's wilderness. By 1995 gloom engulfed the conservation community. The political will to govern forest India had faded and without governance the plunder of India's natural treasures had increased tenfold.

It was at about this time that the Supreme Court of India admitted writ petition 202 – this was a case concerning the deforestation in the Nilgiris and linked to someone's private estate. Soon after in 1996, writ petition 171 was accepted which concerned deforestation in Jammu and Kashmir. It was through both these writ petitions that the Supreme Court was triggered to issue notices to all the states and union territories of India about a series of related issues concerning forests. In the last six years and over dozens of hearings, at least 150 orders and interim orders have been passed beginning with the well-known orders of 1996 where forests were redefined to prevent any loopholes in the law from being exploited which could result in the felling of trees or encouraging any other exploitative activity.

Felling was stopped throughout India except in accordance to a working plan approved by the central government, and in this case the approver was the Ministry of Environment and Forests. In many ways, in the absence of an Indira Gandhi and her political will, a void had been created and to fill it the court was forcing the ministry to act. All non-forest activities on forest land such as mining, sawmills and wood-based industries were stopped pending approval of the central government and clearance under the Forest Conservation Act. Felling of trees was totally banned in the tropical evergreen forests in the Tirap and Changlang areas of Arunachal Pradesh. All sawmills 100 km on either side of the border between Assam and Arunachal Pradesh were ordered shut down. The movement of timber from and between the northeastern states was stopped. In subsequent orders the removal of any tree or even grass was prohibited from national parks and sanctuaries. The definition of forest land covered all wildlife habitats of the country, be they privately protected or not.

The Supreme Court had done a remarkable job. God knows what the state of forest India would have been without these earthshaking orders.

The power focus and role of the ministry changed as it was forced to do much more by the court. It was uncertain whether the ministry could deliver or play the role of an enforcer. Did the right people with commitment and courage exist within its fold who could act and take dynamic decisions? Most would have doubted it, the court included.

**Q**uite unexpectedly one day in 2001, the apex court created two centrally empowered committees for the states of Madhya Pradesh and Chattisgarh. Petition 202 had attracted an enormous amount of interlocutor applications. They had to be reviewed and judged and a bunch of experts were empowered to do just that. Nearly 800 interlocutor applications had flooded the courts on the writs of 202 and 171. Whenever these cases came up for hearing the courtroom was full to the brim with countless lawyers and clients and fees that were difficult to even envisage – such was their magnitude. In many ways these writs had become the biggest cases in Supreme Court history.

The Madhya Pradesh and Chattisgarh committees were probably a test to see how they functioned to ease the load on the courts. And they must have worked. After this in July 2002, the Supreme Court took a decision to create a nationally empowered committee, called the Central Empowered Committee (CEC). Never before in the history of India had something like this been tried where five individuals were empowered by the apex court to judge and make recommendations on a series of different issues.

On 9 September 2002 the Supreme Court in a judgment, made the CEC a statutory authority under the Environment Protection Act. It gave it a tenure of five years. I quote some extracts from the court order:

‘A draft of the proposed notification under section 3[3] of the Environment Protection Act 1986 of constituting the Central Empowered Committee has been shown to the court. According to the draft, the committee is being constituted for a period of five years.’ ‘They are all appointed in their personal capacity. A formal notification will be issued in a week. As and when this notification is issued, whatever functions and responsibilities had been given to the empowered committee will now be exercised by this statutory committee.’

The powers of the committee included dealing with issues connected to forests, wildlife and the environment and persons could seek relief directly from the committee on these issues. The committee also had the power to summon files, papers or even people and conduct formal hearings in order to fulfil its objectives. From July to November 2002 the committee worked hard on some critical issues recommending judgments and orders for the Supreme Court to rule on and it also entertained a series of fresh applications for hearing. The first results from the work of the committee came from the orders of the apex court.

**O**n mining: The first landmark judgment was on Kudremukh and the ongoing iron ore mining in the national park. Though the mining leases had expired in 1999 and against the letter of the law, extensions were given each year for mining and even the Union cabinet had approved an extension for another 20 years. The CEC made its recommendations on the case and the apex court heard the various parties. On 30 October 2002, which will always be a red-letter day for the conservation community, the court delivered its judgment.

In a landmark judgment of 46 pages the Supreme Court of India

endorsed the decision of the Forest Advisory Committee, a committee that is a statutory authority under the Forest Conservation Act, to wind down the Kudremukh Iron Ore Company mining within Kudremukh National Park in 2005. They endorsed the recommendations of the Central Empowered Committee, a statutory authority under the Environment Protection Act. These issues were of vital importance to our protected area system. Listed below are details of the case and extracts from the judgment.

**E**xtracts from Civil Original Jurisdiction I.A.No.670 of 2001. In Writ Petition (C) No.202/1995 [K.M. Chinappa (Applicant) in T.N. Godavarma Thirumulpad (Petitioner) Versus Union of India and Others (Respondents)]:

(1) ‘By destroying nature, environment, man is committing matricide, having in a way killed Mother Earth. Technological excellence, growth of industries, economical gains has led to depletion of natural resources irreversibly. Indifference to the grave consequences, lack of concern and foresight have contributed in large measures to the alarming position. In the case at hand, the alleged victim is the flora and fauna in and around Kudremukh National Park, a part of the Western Ghats. The forests in the area are among 18 internationally recognized “hotspots” for biodiversity conservation in the world.’

(2) ‘The seminal issue involved is whether the approach should be “dollar friendly” or “eco friendly”.

‘Environment is a difficult word to define. Its normal meaning relates to the surroundings, but obviously that is a concept which is relatable to whatever object it is which is surrounded. Einstein had once observed, “The environment is everything that isn’t me.”

About one and half century ago, in 1854, as the famous story goes, the wise Indian Chief Seattle replied to the offer of the great White Chief in Washington to buy their land. The reply is profound. It is beautiful. It is timeless. It contains the wisdom of the ages. It is the first ever and the most understanding statement on environment. The whole of it is worth quoting as any extract from it is to destroy its beauty. "How can you buy or sell the sky, the warmth of the land? The idea is strange to us. If we do not own the freshness of the air and the sparkle of the water, how can you buy them?"

"Every part of the earth is sacred to my people. Every shining pine needle, every sandy shore, every mist in the dark woods, every clearing and humming insect is holy in the memory and experience of my people. The sap which courses through the trees carries the memories of the red man."

"It would be hard to find such a down to earth description of nature. "Nature hates monopolies and knows no exception".

(3) 'The Stockholm Declaration of the United Nations on Human Environment, 1972, reads its Principle No.3, inter-alia, thus:

"Man has the fundamental right to freedom, equality, and adequate conditions of life. In an environment of equality that permits a life of dignity and well being and bears a solemn responsibility to protect and improve the environment for present and future generations."

"It is necessary to avoid massive and irreversible harm to the earthly environment and strife for achieving present generation and the posterity a better life in an environment more in keeping with the needs and hopes. In this context immediately comes to mind the words of Pythagoras who said:

"For so long as man continues to be the ruthless destroyer of lower living

beings, he will never know health or peace. For so long as men massacre animals, they will kill each other. Indeed, they who sow the seeds of murder and pain cannot reap joy and love".

(4) 'Article 48-A in Part IV (Directive Principles) of the Constitution of India, 1950 brought by the Constitution (42 Amendment) Act, 1976, enjoins that the "state shall endeavour to protect and improve the environment and to safeguard the forests and wildlife of the country." Article 47 further imposes the duty on the state to improve public health as its primary duty. Article 51-A(g) imposes "a fundamental duty" on every citizen of India to protect and improve the natural "environment" including forests, lakes, rivers and wildlife and to have compassion for living creatures.'

(5) 'Industrialisation, urbanisation, explosion of population, over exploitation of resources, depletion of traditional sources of energy and raw materials, and the search for new sources of energy and raw materials, the disruption of natural ecological balances, the destruction of multitude of animal and plant species for economic reasons and sometimes for no good reason at all are factors which have contributed to environmental deterioration. While the scientific and technological progress of man has invested him with immense power of nature, it has also resulted in the unthinking use of the power, encroaching endlessly on nature. If man is able to transform deserts into oasis, he is also leaving behind deserts in the place of oasis. In the last century, a great German materialist philosopher warned mankind: "Let us not, however, flatter ourselves over much on account of our human victories over nature. For each such victory nature takes its revenge on us. Each victory, it is true, in the first place brings about the results we expected, but in the sec-

ond and third places it has quite different, unforeseen effects which only too often cancel the first".

(6) 'To protect and improve the environment is a constitutional mandate. It is a commitment for a country wedded to the ideas of a welfare state. The world is under an impenetrable cloud. In view of the enormous challenges thrown by the Industrial Revolution the legislatures throughout the world are busy in an exercise to find the means to protect the world. Every individual in society has a duty to protect nature. People worship the objects of nature. The trees, water, land and animals had gained an important position in ancient times. As Manu VIII, page 282 says, different punishments were prescribed for causing injuries to plants. Kautilya went a step further and fixed punishment on the basis of importance of the part of the tree. (See Kautilya III, XIX, 197).'

(7) 'The Academy Law Review at pages 137-138 says that a recent survey reveals that every day millions of gallons of trade wastes and effluents are discharged into the rivers, streams, lake and sea etc. Indiscriminate water pollution is a problem all over the world, but is now acute in densely populated industrial cities. Our country is no exception to this. Air pollution has further added to the intensity and extent of the problem. Every year millions of tons of gaseous and particulate pollutants are injected into the atmosphere, both through natural processes and as a direct result of human activity. Scientists have pointed out that earth's atmosphere cannot absorb such unlimited amount of pollutant materials without undergoing changes which may be of adverse nature with respect to human welfare. 'Man in order to survive in his planetary home will have to strike a harmonious balance with nature. There may be boundless progress scientifically which may ultimately lead to

destruction of man's valued position in life. The Constitution has laid the foundation of Articles 48-A and 51-A for a jurisprudence of environmental protection. Today, the state and citizen are under a fundamental obligation to protect and improve the environment, including forests, lakes, rivers, wildlife and to have compassion for living creatures.'

(8) 'A learned jurist has said, the Rig Veda praises the beauty of the dawn (usha) and worships Nature in all its glory. And yet today a bath in the Yamuna and Ganga is a sin against bodily health, not a salvation for the soul – so polluted and noxious are these "Holy" waters now. "One hospital bed out of four in the world is occupied by a patient who is ill because of polluted water... Provision of a safe and convenient water supply is the most important activity that could be undertaken to improve the health of people living in rural areas of the developing world" (WHO). "Nature never did betray that heart that loves her." (Wordsworth). The anxiety to save the environment manifested in the Constitution (42 Amendment) Act, 1976 by the introduction of a specific provision for the first time to "protect and improve" the environment.'

(9) 'The state is the trustee of all natural resources which are by nature meant for public use and enjoyment. Public at large is the beneficiary of the seashore, running waters, airs, forests and ecologically fragile lands. The state as a trustee is under a legal duty to protect the natural resources. These resources meant for public use cannot be converted into private ownership.'

(10) 'The aesthetic use and the pristine glory cannot be permitted to be eroded for private, commercial or any use unless the courts find it necessary, in good faith, for public good and in public interest to encroach upon the said resources.'

(11) 'Sustainable development is essentially a policy and strategy for continued economic and social development without detriment to the environment and natural resources on the quality of which continued activity and further development depend. Therefore, while thinking of the developmental measures the needs of the present and the ability of the future to meet its own needs and requirements have to be kept in view. While thinking the present, the future should not be forgotten. We owe a duty to future generations and for a bright today, bleak tomorrow cannot be countenanced. We must learn from our experiences of the past to make both the present and the future brighter. We learn from our experiences, mistakes from the past, so that they can be rectified for a better present and the future. It cannot be lost sight of that while today is yesterday's tomorrow, it is tomorrow's yesterday.'

(12) 'The greenery of India should not be allowed to be perished, to be replaced by deserts. Ethiopia which at a point of time was considered to be one of the greenest countries, is virtually a vast desert today.'

(13) 'It is, therefore, necessary for the government to keep in view the international obligations while exercising discretionary powers under the Conservation Act unless there are compelling reasons to depart there from.'

(14) 'The UN Conference on Human Environment held in Stockholm during June 1972 brought into focus several alarming situations and highlighted the immediate need to take steps to control menace of pollution to the Mother Earth, air and of space failing which, the conference cautioned mankind, it should be ready to face the disastrous consequences. The suggestions noted in this conference were reaffirmed in successive conferences followed by the Earth Summit held at Rio de Janeiro (Brazil) in 1992.'

(15) 'Before we part with the case, we note with concern that the state and the Central government were not very consistent in their approach about the period for which the activities can be permitted. Reasons have been highlighted to justify the somersault. Whatever be the justification, it was but imperative that due application of mind should have been made before taking a particular stand and not to change colour like a chameleon, and that too not infrequently.'

This judgment was perfectly put and in a way spelt out the philosophy of the court and the laws of the land. It would close down a Rs 2000 crore mining operation by 2005 that had been ongoing for 22 years inside Kudremukh National Park. This judgment would create vital precedents for other national parks also. The apex court of the country was prepared to uphold the cause of our wilderness even though the Union cabinet had cleared the mining lease for another 20 years. This judgment will change the future of forests and wildlife especially in relation to their exploitation.

Then came a series of other orders based on the recommendations of the CEC.

**O**ne eviction of forest encroachers: The rich, the powerful, and the famous had encroached some of the finest forest land in the outcrops of the Western Ghats in the Chikmagalur district of Karnataka. Over the years, much of this land had been converted into coffee plantations. Then came along an honest forest officer who regardless of political pressures issued notices to the encroachers and finally this case travelled through 202 to the apex court and the CEC.

The court endorsed the recommendations of the CEC and not only asked for the removal of all the encroachments according to the forest boun-

daries as mapped by the Survey of India but also ordered:

‘The encroachers are liable to compensate for the losses caused due to the encroachments especially when the land encroached upon has been utilised for commercial purposes. We, however, take a lenient view and direct that if the encroachers voluntarily vacate the encroached land and hand over the same to the Chief Conservator of Forests within three months from today, i.e. on or before 31 January 2003, they will not be liable to pay any compensation but if they continue to remain in occupation then they will have to pay Rs 5 lakh per hectare per month to the state government. Money so recovered shall be kept in a separate account and shall be used exclusively for forest protection and rehabilitation of the encroached area with the concurrence of the Central Empowered Committee.

**A**ction taken report shall be filed by the Chief Secretary Karnataka before the Central Empowered Committee every month till the encroachments are completely removed and all the compensation payable by the encroachers has been deposited. Copy of the action taken report be filed in this court. Liberty is given to the Central Empowered Committee to seek further directions.’

The Chief Secretary, Karnataka was personally made responsible for the removal of encroachments and the Director General of Police entrusted with providing police protection. This order provides a deterrent for anyone who considers encroaching a viable proposition. The next big judgment that is awaited from the Supreme Court would be about the encroachments by local people since nearly 14 lakh hectares of this country’s forest land, at a value of Rs 50,00,00 crore, has been encroached. Everyone hopes

that a balance between safeguarding forest India and the wellbeing of genuine local people will be found.

**O**n commercial vandalism of the countryside: A report of a senior journalist in *The Financial Express* about the defacing of rocks in the Himalayas of Himachal Pradesh for commercial advertising triggered the apex court into rapid action. Called the ‘Coke-Pepsicase’, the court involved the CEC into assessing the damage done. It then penalised the business companies for this vandalism that included some of India’s leading companies. So far at least Rs 5 crore have been recovered in damages and the case goes on. It has taught many a lesson and has resulted in a cleaning up in many states of India since the defacing spread across all the states of India. All the companies that abused the environment were suddenly rushing around trying to wash out the evidence! Let’s hope for a while it teaches everyone the lesson they truly deserve.

On compensatory afforestation: Each year forest land is used by public and private sector organisations. It gets diverted for mining, irrigation projects, power projects and so on. A Forest Advisory Committee in the Ministry of Environment and Forests is entrusted with giving clearance for the larger chunks of land. The project proponent is asked to afforest degraded land, sometimes even four times the amount that has been diverted. Roughly, the Centre and the states spend Rs 1500 crore on this activity each year. For decades this entire process has been in a mess and little gets regreened. It is this process that occupies enormous amounts of time of the forest service. The CEC spent several weeks with the states and their senior-most forest officers discussing this issue threadbare and recommended to the apex court new and

innovative ways to deal with afforestation. The Supreme Court endorsed these recommendations and directed that:

‘The Union of India shall within eight weeks from today frame comprehensive rules with regard to the constitution of a body and management of the compensatory afforestation funds in concurrence with the Central Empowered Committee. These rules shall be filed in this court within eight weeks from today. Necessary notification constituting this body will be issued simultaneously. Compensatory Afforestation Funds which have not been realised as well as the unspent funds already realised by the states shall be transferred to the said body within six months of its constitution by the respective states and user agencies.

**I**n addition to the above, while according transfer under the Forest Conservation Act, 1980 for change in user agency for all non-forest purposes, the user agency shall also pay into the said fund the net value of the forest land diverted for non-forest purposes. The present value is to be recovered at the rate of Rs 5.80 lakh per hectare to Rs 9.20 lakh per hectare of forest land depending on the quantity and density of the land in question converted for non-forest use. This will be subject to upward revision by the Ministry of Environment and Forests in consultation with Central Empowered Committee as and when necessary.’

This order has much more detail to it. Everything that is to be done must be with the concurrence of the CEC. This central fund is also to receive all monies that might accrue from diversion of protected area land. The order states, ‘Such monies shall be used exclusively for undertaking protection and conservation activities in protected areas of the respective states/union territories.’

What is interesting about this order is that the definition of compensatory afforestation has changed since now both assisted natural regeneration and the protection of root stock is equally, if not more, important. The focus is on site-specific plans and protection of the forests. User agencies will also be involved in this activity and most vital of all, 'Plantations must use local and indigenous species since exotics have long term negative impacts on the environment.'

The entire forest infrastructure was being reformed and restructured in one stroke. Not only would there be a body to manage funds at the federal level but also a value assigned to every bit of land diverted. This had never happened before in the history of India. This federal fund would deal with forests, wildlife and the environment. In fact, the first large deposit into this fund would be the sum of Rs 50 crore from the power corporation that was setting up electricity lines in Rajaji National Park. This order would also signal the end of the planting of exotic species like eucalyptus, casuarina, and the horrible *prosopis juliflora*. It was a landmark order.

**O**n sawmills and wood based industries: The Supreme Court in all its wisdom also accepted the CEC recommendations that the ban on sawmills and wood based industries in Nagaland should be extended by a further period of five years. It re-endorsed the fact that no state or union territory was permitted to run an unlicensed sawmill or any other wood related industry in India. All the chief secretary's across India were to ensure strict compliance. There are to be no relaxation in the rules and this would be vital in the saving of forests across India. The CEC has the vital role to concur, oversee and guide all these directions.

On illegal mining in the Aravallis: On a CEC report about the mining of the Aravalli's in Haryana, the apex court came out with an earth shattering order. It is this kind of order that will give breathing space to the most plundered hill ranges of Rajasthan and Haryana—it could even save what is left.

'We prohibit and ban all mining activity in the entire Aravalli hills. The chief secretary, state of Haryana and chief secretary, state of Rajasthan are directed to ensure that no mining activity in the Aravalli hills is carried out, especially, in that part that has been regarded as forest area or protected under the Environment Protection Act.' [The order has subsequently been revised. While the ban remains in force in Haryana, its scope in Rajasthan has been confined to national parks and sanctuaries.]

**I**t is quite clear to me that in the last 6 to 7 years the Supreme Court of India has spread a blanket of protective orders over forest India in order to save it. This they did in the absence of political will and good governance. The early 1990s were a time when so many of our laws that govern forests were continuously violated. These violations triggered many more writs bringing in the apex court to provide rulings. And they did. I think that the most far-reaching orders that will forever be historic came in 2002 and I have tried to look at them in some detail. I believe this process will continue till the country develops the political will to govern properly. Legal action is vital at the moment if our rich and fragile natural treasures are to survive. Our institutions that govern are so eroded and paralysed that only a sea change in the political and economic climate of the country can put things right. Who knows what the future will hold?

# Inventing our own model

VIR SANGHVI

SOMETHING curious is happening in the world of media and I'm not sure if we know quite what it is. Ten years ago, globalisation was the buzzword. As the Indian economy liberalized and opened up, we thought we had a road map for the future. We had been a siege economy for too long, shackled so that we could not keep up with our East Asian neighbours. Now, we finally had an opportunity to follow the rest of the world.

Over the last decade, however, experience suggests that, at least in the media field, India has not followed the example of East Asia. Nor has it replicated the progress of the West. Instead, an entirely new model of behaviour has emerged, a model that is peculiarly Indian.

This is most immediately apparent in the world of television. When the satellite channels first appeared on our TV screens in the early to mid 1990s, most people in the TV business believed that we could follow a western model. The argument ran something like this: as the world continues to become a global village, Indians will want more global news and entertainment. CNN and the BBC World Service will become leading news providers. The international shows that have taken the world by storm (Baywatch, The X Files) will rule the airwaves. And because TV is an up-market medium and because cable connections are relatively expensive, the universe for satellite TV will consist of English-aspiring (if not exactly English-speaking), globally focused Indians.

It was this predicted pattern of viewership that dominated the early TV schedules. MTV, the global music

channel, beamed international pop and rock programming. The BBC World Service carried the Nine O'clock BBC domestic news live from London and Star TV, owned then by Richard Li, stuck to American entertainment: sitcoms and thrillers.

This first phase ended around the time that Rupert Murdoch took control of Star. Murdoch recognized that Star Plus had failed to penetrate the Indian market and reckoned that the way ahead was to ditch the concept of a Pan-Asian or global TV network and to provide an India-specific service. Accordingly, Star Plus became a bilingual version of a general interest TV channel like Britain's ITV 1. There was some Indian current affairs programming (in English), some original Hindi programming, some English language American programming and versions of popular global TV hits like *The Bold and the Beautiful* dubbed into Hindi.

Murdoch threw the BBC off the Star platform and after a dispute with MTV, started his own music channel, Channel V. Recognising that the audience for global rock was limited, V abandoned the MTV formula and went for Hindi film music. When MTV did return, on another platform, it proudly declared that it would play indipop but was still unwilling to play Hindi film music. The sole winner in this phase was Zee TV, a low-budget Indian channel whose bargain basement programming found huge audiences, largely because it seemed to be in Hindi.

Learning from the success of Zee (and after a legal settlement that saw Zee leave the Star platform), Murdoch tried a third *avatar* of Star

Plus. This was completely Hindi, had no news and current affairs and built its appeal around a Hindi version of *Who Wants To Be A Millionaire*, retitled *Kaun Banega Crorepati* (or KBC), and hosted by Amitabh Bachchan. KBC was a runaway success and its performance led people to believe that perhaps international programming, suitably Indianised, had a future in India.

**B**ut then, a strange thing happened. As KBC's ratings began to slide, a new kind of programme began to take over. This was a daily soap opera of the sort that nobody in the West had seen. Its characters were usually rich, over-dressed and over-made-up. They played out the traditional themes of Indian family life – the mother-in-law versus the daughter-in-law, tensions within a joint family and so on.

By the time KBC finished its initial run, this new kind of show, peculiar to India and invented by our own programmers, had come to dominate TV. Star tried to follow KBC with another Indianised quiz show: *Kamzor Kadi Kaun*, a Hindi version of *The Weakest Link*. But this proved to be a dismal failure and was pulled off the air. Other channels, which had experimented with Hindi reworkings of *Columbo*, *Charlie's Angels* etc. abandoned these concepts and rushed to produce family soaps. Suddenly an entirely Indian genre, invented within the last five years, had taken over.

Today's TV scene looks something like this. The so-called international news channels that everyone predicted would dominate TV (BBC World and CNN) are watched so little that they don't even show up on the charts. MTV, which has finally abandoned its reservations and gone filmi, only has a minor presence as does Channel V (neither makes much of a profit). The English-speaking elite

watches Star News (on the Murdoch platform but produced by an Indian provider, NDTV) but even this successful channel does not approach the ratings of two Hindi news channels: Aaj Tak and Zee News.

In the world of entertainment, Star Plus, home of the family soap, reigns supreme, with something like 40 programmes in the top 50. So successful is the new Star Plus formula that the channel is debating whether or not to bring back KBC – perhaps it doesn't need it any longer. Other channels are trying hard to replicate the Star Plus formula.

So, what happened to globalisation? What happened to the upmarket English-aspiring class? What happened to international news? What happened to global rock and roll? What happened to *Baywatch* and *The X Files*? Answer: India ignored all existing models of TV development and evolved its own. The emergence of an Indian TV paradigm is now pretty much the conventional wisdom. What is less widely accepted is that even in print media, we seem to be ignoring the global experience and inventing our own model.

**N**o matter which western newspaper market you look at, some factors seem common. As more and more people get their news from TV, newspapers have had to adapt to do different things. In most developed markets, they have got fatter and thicker and concentrated more on features and opinion columns. The exception is Britain where these rules hold true for broadsheets but the tabloid press has become more sex-obsessed, more focused on the private lives of celebrities and even more sensational as a way of still seeming interesting.

Britain has a national press but in the United States, newspapers tend to owe allegiance to a single city. The

Washington Post is Washington's newspaper; the LA Times performs the same role in LA; the Miami Herald does it in Miami, and so on. There are two national papers (USA Today and perhaps, *The Wall Street Journal*) but neither really impinges on each big city newspaper's market share. Nor do the big newspapers try and become national brands: in fact, most can be identified by the names of their cities in their titles.

**I**t was generally assumed that as India globalised, as the economy opened up, as consumer advertising boomed and as literacy rates went up, the English-language press at least would follow a western model. After all, all Indian newspapers had started life as copies of western (usually English) originals (as had the magazines: *India Today* after *Time*; *Business India* after *Businessweek*), so why shouldn't they continue to follow these papers in their development?

Instead, a curious thing has happened. Since 1994 or so, western and Indian patterns of newspaper development have diverged sharply. For a start, we no longer follow the American model of each newspaper market having its own favourite paper. In Delhi, the traditional leader, the *Hindustan Times* is under serious threat from *The Times of India*. In Bangalore, *The Times* has beaten *Deccan Herald*, the historical leader; in Chandigarh, the *Hindustan Times* is on the verge of overtaking *The Tribune*; in Calcutta, *The Statesman* seems doomed and *The Telegraph's* dominance is threatened by the rapid rate of growth of *The Times of India* and the *Hindustan Times*, and so on. Unlike America, Indian newspapers are becoming national brands and local favourites are finding the going tough.

Nor does the British model, with the market divided between tabloids



and broadsheets, seem to fit. We have only one successful tabloid in India (Bombay's Mid-day) but many of the broadsheets are engaging in activities that are more commonly associated with tabloids in the UK. Would The Times (London) or The Guardian (to say nothing of The New York Times) be as proud of sponsoring a beauty pageant as The Times of India is of the Miss India show? More to the point, would any western broadsheet have gained so much (as evidenced by brand surveys) from such an exercise in the way in which The Times of India undoubtedly has gained?

Even the content of Indian papers has begun to sharply diverge from the western model. British newspapers are now, like their American counterparts, vast, multi-section affairs, full of hundreds of pages of big pictures and long articles.

In contrast, Indian papers have actually got *thinner* this year (an 18 page main paper is not uncommon these days), Sunday feature supplements have been halved in size, and the so-called youth supplements (Delhi Times, HT City etc.) are full only of advertising.

It's not hard to see why this should be so. Indian newspapers pay global rates for newsprint (still around 60% of a newspaper company's cost structure) but sell their products at absurdly low prices. Even after price wars, a British newspaper will cost the equivalent of Rs 40 or so. A paper in Singapore or Thailand will cost around Rs 20 or more. An Indian paper, on the other hand, will cost Rs 1.50.

It is not that newspaper barons all want to charge so little. The problem is that readers are reluctant to pay more. Any newspaper that raises its price sees circulation collapse as readers defect to rivals. Any newspaper

that lowers price sees a swell in circulation. Once the so-called 'invitation price' period is over and price returns to normal, readers stop subscribing.

**M**any newspaper editors have challenged this rule of market pricing. Surely, there must be people willing to pay Rs 3 for a newspaper? Perhaps a higher priced paper won't touch the circulation of The Times of India or the Hindustan Times, but it will still sell enough to break even? No such luck. No paper priced at Rs 3 or more can sell more than 25,000 copies in Delhi. And that's not enough to break even. (Or have much influence, for that matter.)

The restricted size dictates the content. If the whole paper is 18 pages and half of that is advertising, the average paper has only nine full pages to play with. One of those is the editorial page (traditionally ad-free), another is the front page (usually only one ad in the bottom right hand corner) and a third is the Op-ed page (usually kept largely ad-free). This means that most of the nine pages worth of advertising will have to be accommodated in the 15 remaining pages of the paper. That doesn't leave a lot of room. So, you can forget about long analytical pieces. There's no room for intelligent features. There's no question of columns of opinion. And the average story has to be 300 words or less.

How then, does a newspaper, with all the space of an average school bulletin board, distinguish itself from its competitors? It can't be depth of coverage – there really isn't enough room. Nor can it be comprehensiveness – for the same reason. And even quality of writing is of limited use as a distinguisher – at 300 words an article, you are writing telegraphic English anyway.

From these limitations has emerged an Indian model. To be fair

to The Times of India, this model is largely its creation though nearly all of its rivals have been forced by the market to adopt some of its components. It has long been axiomatic in the newspaper business that the people with the shortest attention span are children. So the short article format is ideally suited to youth. At The Times, the medium has become the message. And along with a dose of demographic mumbo jumbo (such and such proportion of India's population is below 20 etc.), catering to youth has become the new *mantra*.

In most senses, this is the reverse of usual western demographic targeting. Advertisers know that children have very little disposable income. Far better therefore to target consumers in the 25 to 35 (or 40) bracket who are most willing and able to buy new products. But in India, a 35 year-old reader is regarded by many newspaper marketing departments as already being too old.

Once you say that children (or young people) are your ideal audience, then other consequences follow. It becomes reasonable to avoid weighty subjects on page one (youngsters don't care about famine! they are bored by politics! etc.). Your international pages need only carry stories about Jennifer Lopez or James Bond (young people can't tell the West Bank from Grindlays Bank!). You can use Hindi slang in your headlines (because that's how young people talk these days!). And you don't have to worry too much about an editorial page (which young person ever reads an edit?)

Once this formula is in place, you have a newspaper that breaks all the rules of successful western newspapers. Logically, you should have a paper that, while it appeals to young people, turns off adults. But here's

the funny thing: even adults seem to love it. What does this tell us about the Indian middle class? I do not know. And it worries me to even think about it.

There are other aspects of the Indian formula that divert from the western model. Most journalists – especially in Europe and the UK – are cynical, weary souls with little time for spirituality or religion. Nevertheless, religion – in a formal sense, say church engagements or appointments – will find place in their papers. But there won't be spirituality. There will be no dissertations about the true nature of Godhead on the editorial page.

**T**he most extraordinary aspect of The Times of India formula is that spirituality is an essential – and extremely popular – part of the model. Such columns as The Speaking Tree or Sacred Space may provoke derision from journalists but readership survey after readership survey demonstrates their hold over the market. Readers of all ages seem to want to read such articles as 'The ultimate joy is inner growth' by the likes of Swami Sukhabodhananda. The parallel would be for The New York Times to devote a large chunk of its editorial page every day to Jerry Falwell and Deepak Chopra (The Times has a similar range – from formal religion to new age). In any western paper, this would be unthinkable. In India, it is the path to success.

Because spirituality and an interview (often with a film star or a business tycoon) have taken up permanent residence on the edit page, many people suspect that eventually the paper will discontinue the editorials entirely. The Times denies this (though there are persistent rumours that the process will begin in the smaller editions) but the recent appearance of something called Our Comment

on page one has strengthened that suspicion.

In most of the western world, serious newspapers avoid putting comment into their front-page articles. Inside, a paper will usually have several pages of opinion and comment, both from its own editorial board and from outsiders but the news is sacred. In Britain, however, tabloids do not follow this principle, happily putting short pithy comments on page one (eg: The Sun says: Britain must crack down on asylum-seekers NOW!)

The Times of India has followed the British tabloids in this respect, appending a tabloid-style three-line comment to page one stories. Simplistic in tone, written in a style suited to a college magazine (for instance: 'Attaboy Atal!' when Vajpayee obliquely criticized Narendra Modi), the Our Comment feature leaves no room for subtlety. And yet, the editorial page team produces it and when journalistic sneering got too much, the editor of the edit page even wrote a signed (if largely unreadable) column praising his employers' vision in dreaming up the idea. Within The Times, they believe that other papers will soon stop sneering and copy the innovation. Who knows? They may still be proven right.

**W**hat do all these examples tell us? It is probably too early to come to any definite conclusions. But some things do, nevertheless, seem clear. The first is that the Indian media will not follow western models of evolution. Globalisation has not brought us closer to the West. It has pushed us into adopting a distinct Indian media identity. The second is that the level of westernisation among the Indian middle class (and this includes the upper middle class – the so-called SEC-A) is much lower than one might otherwise suspect. Just because people

crave western goods does not mean that they share the values of western popular culture.

One instance of this is the manner in which Hindi TV channels are far more popular than English channels even in households that we would regard as English-speaking. Another instance is the complete rejection of western programming and the search for Indian themes, whether they deal with the joint family or tensions with in-laws. (Critics routinely describe the values espoused by these serials as regressive; it makes no difference to their popularity.) The third instance is the refusal of Indian readers to go with the western tendency to read analysis and to be impressed by argumentative columns. Indians – even relatively rich Indians – are less interested in ideas than we may have thought. They are happier with spirituality and tradition.

**S**ociologists will probably have their own theories about why events have followed this course. I've heard it said that the economic growth of the 1980s and 1990s created a new middle class that did not share the background of the old middle class. Others have suggested that the Indian middle class, stunned by the avalanche of consumer goods and the high salaries of the last decade, is still playing the kid in the candy store; that it is too thrilled by prosperity and consumption to worry about ideas. All that will come later, when the middle class reaches another stage of evolution and matures.

I'm not a sociologist so I won't pretend to know the answers. But I think I speak for more and more people in the media when I say that the experience of the last decade has surprised us all.

And yes, we are not exactly overjoyed by what we see.

# Nero's guests

P. SAINATH

'(they) were doomed to the flames and burnt, to serve as a nightly illumination when daylight had expired. Nero offered his gardens for the spectacle.'

Tacitus (Roman historian and official, c.58 to 115 C.E.)  
*The Annals, Book XV, C.E. 62-65*

IT was talking to Lewis Lapham that sent me back to Tacitus. We had looked at the mindset that extreme inequality breeds. The editor of *Harpers* pointed to Nero's garden parties, the lighting for which he provided by setting aflame human beings.

Now we do know that Nero was mad. (Unlike some of his saner predecessors who routinely fed thousands of human beings to animals at the Coliseum.) So this sort of conduct, while shocking, was not surprising. Much later, the Nazis did worse. His-

tory has many contenders for cruelty's crown.

More interesting was the conduct of Nero's guests. Rome's elite prominent amongst them. What sort of sensibility did it require to pop another fig into your mouth as one more human being went up in flames nearby to serve as 'a nightly illumination?' For the party to go on, singing and dancing, as the spectacle unfolded?

Tacitus doesn't say.

Many big events crowded October 2002. The Kashmir elections, more farmers' suicides, hunger deaths. It was the month of a nearly-happened debate on CEO excesses, in India and worldwide. The month when a mob lynched five dalits accused of cow slaughter in Haryana. A mob egged on in its efforts by the police.

Future historians might not get to see this period that way. Not if they use the media of our time as a major source. They would find an event more momentous than any of these and outstripping all of them in importance, in the second week of October. Whether in column space in the print media or in broadcast time on countless channels, the occurrence hogging the first rough drafts of history was Amitabh Bachchan's birthday.

*The Times of India* had an eight-page colour supplement to commemorate the happy occasion. Bachchanalia stormed huge swathes of media territory. A party the costs of which are yet unknown. But which drew anybody who has ever inhabited Page 3. (To its credit, *The Indian Express* had a supplement on Jayaprakash Narayan's 100th birth anniversary on the same day, October 11. Few, of course, had anything at all on October 2, the anniversary of Mohandas Karamchand who said, among other things: Live simply, that others might simply live.) Some channels forgot everything else. 'Nation celebrates Amitabh's birthday,' said one beaming anchor while giving us the headlines.

October saw at least an attempt at a debate on CEO earnings and growing disparities. That was natural. After years of unrestrained corporate loot, Enron, WorldCom, Global Crossing et al had hit the fan. There were serious efforts to link these issues to the problem of soaring inequality. In a powerful piece in *The New York Times*, Princeton Professor Paul Krugman presented devastating data and raised hard questions on CEO incomes.

Management Guru Tom Peters entered the debate the same month from a different angle. He suggested that 'Good CEOs' should re-designate themselves CDOs. That is, as chief

destruction officers. Because 'you essentially get paid for blowing up your own business before the competition does.' Even our own *Economic Times*, while celebrating their culture in every respect, found space for this one line. 'The CEOs of India Inc. are raking it in, recession or no recession.'

And then Narayana Murthy, founder of Infosys, spoke up. And took his corporate brethren by surprise. Murthy said that the events had discredited CEOs. That the gaps between them and ordinary workers were too wide. That in India, in his view, the salary of the top officer of a company should not be more than 15-20 times that of the lowest-paid one. Murthy draws a low salary by corporate norms, despite having been one of India's most successful CEOs, and possibly the most admired. He felt that the social and moral dimensions of this issue in our country lent it some urgency.

Almost a corporate October Revolution? Not quite. Under a cacophony of protesting bleats from scared CEOs – and newspapers defending the majesty of The Market – Murthy clarified that he was not suggesting any mandatory limits. The Indian Express blasted his heresies with an editorial 'Pay Peanuts, Get Monkeys.' (A few of our newspapers have sometimes paid gold and got gorillas for editors, but that's another story.) Hacks from the 'Greed is Good' school of thought and televangelists of the Marie Antoinette School of Economics quickly educated their audiences on the absurdity of such ideas.

The insurrection squashed, it was time to get back to Amitabh's 60th birthday bash.

Well, at least the idea had been raised and by no less a man than Murthy. Both television and newspapers did carry tables and graphics

on CEO salaries. One showed that Dhirubhai Ambani's last earnings totalled Rs 8.85 crore. Anil Ambani's take the same year was Rs 7.13 crore. One graphic even claimed a package of Rs 9.54 crore for a single individual.

Fascinating. But something was missing in this stirring tale of possible 'ceilings' on CEO earnings. And that was any discussion of 'the floor' in the pickings of the lesser classes. To see just how serious those social and moral dimensions are in this country, Narayana Murthy might want to extend his comparisons outside the confines of individual companies. He would see the gaps are far worse than he had imagined.

Professor Krugman rightly finds the idea of a CEO earning a thousand times what an ordinary worker does in his country somewhat obscene. But what is the gap between the top Indian CEOs and, say, an agricultural labourer in rural India scraping together Rs 3,000 a year with some luck? If we take that Rs 9 crore figure as a guide, that executive earns 30,000 times what a poor Indian does. What millions of poor Indians earn each year. Even more, if we take the earnings of a woman landless labourer. If we use for comparison someone midway in the top ten CEO list, you'd still find gaps of 1:15,000 and over.

In the year before his salary edged towards the Rs 9 crore figure, Dhirubhai Ambani gave himself a modest raise of 346 per cent. Tens of millions of landless labourers, alas, can't remember when they last saw 'a raise'. They are mostly unable to enforce their rights to even the pathetic minimum wage in their states. Except where their unions are strong, rural workers due to get, say, Rs 45 a day, might get Rs 15 less or worse. And through the 1990s, large numbers of them have faced a decline in days on which they find work. For

many, real wages have stagnated or declined.

And CEO packages do not always tell the full story. (One of Murthy's critics was unkind in his remarks. He said he found the Infosys chief's modesty unbecoming of a CEO who took a low salary 'but gave himself countless crores in stock options'.)

**A**ll in all, we're looking at gaps of anywhere from 20,000 to 35,000 times between the earnings of richest and poorest Indians. And yet, how can we leave out global comparisons in an era where these so fascinate us?

Krugman writes that in his last full year at General Electric (GE), Jack Welch was paid \$123 million (including stock and stock options). That's only 1.2 million times the Rs 4,500 a landless labourer near Enron's Dabhol Power Project in Maharashtra might earn in a good year. They're connected. GE had a role in Enron's project from day one.

And still the party goes on.

When Dhirubhai took ill and was hospitalised, TV crews and hordes of newspaper hacks struck root at the place. From close by, they monitored his every heartbeat. What remained of India's poor public health system eroded swiftly through the 1990s. Few reports appeared, though, on what that meant for the health of hundreds of millions.

When Dhirubhai died, major newspapers said – without a hint of criticism – that 450 kilograms of pure sandalwood adorned the funeral pyre. This had been flown in from Karnataka. Doubtless to ensure him a fragrant journey as he made his way to heaven (well, to somewhere). If true, even in death, Dhirubhai still gladdened the hearts of entrepreneurs like Veerappan. (Surely one of very few people who can produce so much sandalwood at short notice).

Some time ago, I came across another kind of funeral in Karnataka. Bandiappa, husband of Sushilabai, had died in a village in Gulbarga. This in a region where more people bury rather than burn their dead. (Only those at the top of the caste ladder practice cremation.) But Bandiappa, a dalit, ended up undergoing a bit of both. The dominant castes would not allow an untouchable to be laid to rest near their village. He was being buried when they forcibly stopped it. Then Sushilabai tried cremating him, but the firewood and oil the family could afford was not enough. And so Bandiappa lay, outside his village for a day, half-buried, half-burnt.

I thought of Sushilabai the day the Polyester Prince died. But since Dhirubhai earned 32,000 times what she did, we can understand these as differences in their levels of efficiency.

**L**ast year, Mumbai's elite vied to be seen at another party. That celebrating Sharad Pawar's 60th birthday – the man who gave us the Enron deal. Tens of millions of rupees were spent on this bash. Since hordes of editors and journalists were also present, you'd have expected some sharp coverage. The more so since the lavish do in honour of the 'farmers' leader' unfolded amongst mounting suicides by debt-ridden cultivators in the same state. But the media were there as guests, and proud to be. The following day's editorials poured praise on Pawar. There was not even a suggestion that what had happened was vulgar and insensitive.

For some years now, the rich in the metros have been into 'theme weddings'. Huge canvas replicas of the Sistine Chapel or the Palace of Udaipur built at a cost of crores of rupees. To last just one night. This, in a nation where hundreds of millions face sharpening distress. You'd think that

would draw some critical comment in the media. It doesn't. Sometimes, it gets celebrated in cover stories that link it to the 'prosperity ushered in by the reforms.' Or as a 'refreshing break' from the 'tired old days of state socialism.' The sad past when the rich had 'to be apologetic about spending on the good things in life.'

What is the stage at which a society decides that inequality has gone far enough? That it dehumanises both its victims and those who produce it? That no one can sustain a society building gaps of 1:30,000. Of inequities so sharp and so cruel?

There is certainly a point, a boundary beyond which insensitivity is no longer wrong. When obscene levels of inequality are seen as normal. When the Greed is Good gang asserts that inequality is not bad, it is even desirable. And when this claims gains legitimacy. Much of the Indian elite have stepped past that boundary. This is the moral matrix of our present levels of inequality.

**S**ure, there has been some reporting of hunger-related deaths in recent years. From Rajasthan and Orissa, for instance. But it has been marginal to the scale – and more importantly the nature – of the problem. In the 1990s such deaths resurfaced in a big way for the first since independence. But they are not seen as policy-driven. Much more as the result of natural calamity. And of those catch-all clichés 'official neglect'. Or 'faulty implementation'.

It has yet to dawn on many that perhaps the largest number of such deaths since 1992 have taken place in the very rich state of Maharashtra. (In Melghat, in Mokhada, Dhule and other places.) Not in Bihar or Orissa. Some of these have occurred no further than 90 kilometres from the city of Mumbai where so much wealth is concentrated.

In five months in 2002, 22 children aged three or less died in Maharashtra. In just a single taluk of Thane district. As *Frontline* reports: 'Severe malnutrition had left the children vulnerable to diseases. Investigations reveal that many more deaths remain unreported.'

Then the Commissioner of the Tribal Research and Training Institute, Arun Bhatia, went public. One of the state's senior-most IAS officers, he highlighted hunger-linked deaths on a much larger scale in the state's tribal belt. The government's response was to try and 'discipline' him. (He has since retired.) The interest shown in this problem by the national press in this period ranged from low to nil.

**I**n Rajasthan, adivasi families are 'rotating hunger' as they have been doing for three years or more now. This means each day one family member goes without food—because there is so little at home. The member who does get to eat is the one who goes out looking for work. With work so hard to find, these families are crushed. Unsurprisingly, more and more hunger-linked deaths are taking place in the state.

In Andhra Pradesh the previous year, hungry people were forced to buy rice at Rs 6.40 a kilogram. This, in drought-hit regions, while we exported rice at Rs 5.45 a kg. But Chandrababu Naidu remained the media's darling. And that of Bill Gates. Which meant that only a few dedicated reporters in the state tried to tell people about what was happening.

Andhra led the trend in hunger deaths right from the early 1990s. The weavers of Pochampally were among the first to succumb to that trend—and to suicide.

In Orissa, such deaths have occurred often since 1996. People in adivasi pockets of the state say offi-

cials are bullying them. There are commissions of inquiry coming by. And they must be told that the deaths had nothing to do with hunger.

Who would have ever have thought to see hunger-related deaths in Tamil Nadu? Yet, at least eight weavers there went that way this year.

The list is long. In state after state, the policies of the 1990s are claiming human lives in large numbers. Most establishment economists do not refer to this at all. The very few who do, have a cute term for it. It's all about 'managing the problems of transition.' (Transition to what, we are never told.) These were sad, but not structural. Aberrations, not endemic.

Sure, some of the deaths do get covered. The problem is that the processes leading to them usually don't. The hunger deaths are only an extreme symptom of what has gone wrong. To disconnect them from the process is to distort the story.

**A**nd then there are the suicides. In early December, Maharashtra Chief Minister Vilasrao Deshmukh confirmed that 26 farmers had ended their lives in the past few months. These are not to be confused with the suicides that took place while Mumbai's elite blew out the candles at the Great Maratha's birthday bash last year. Nor do they include the rash of suicides in the region in 1998. Nor the ones that occurred in year 2000.

Uttar Pradesh has got in on the act, with sugarcane farmers in Sitapur taking their own lives. And suicides have been on in Gujarat for a while now.

In Karnataka, the rise in farmer suicides was worrying. So the government set up a committee to study the problem. It drew flak this year when people realised there was not a single farmer on that committee.

In Rajasthan, close to 500 farmers committed suicide in 2001. *The Hindustan Times* puts the toll for five years from 1997 to 2001 at around 3,000.

In March 2002, Punjab Chief Minister Amarinder Singh spoke to the *New Indian Express*. He said: 'Six hundred farmers have killed themselves in the last one year in my state.' That disclosure was buried in the seventh paragraph of the interview. It found no mention in the headline.

Take just one district of Andhra Pradesh—Anantapur. As many as 1,826 people there, mostly farmers, took their lives between 1997 and the end of 2000. As many as 45 per cent of these were women. (There are a lot of women-headed households in this high-migration region.) Year 2000 alone saw 577 people end their lives. The figure for 2001 crossed 600.

Some—far from all—of the farmers' suicides have been reported. Again, with a focus on drought and other calamities. The collapse of investment in agriculture is rarely mentioned. The crash in rural employment, the gutting of rural credit, the rise of input prices—these do sometimes pop up. But they are seldom emphasized. Anything that calls into question the nature of 'the reforms' is played down.

**I**n August, as lakhs of peasants left their homes in a desperate search for work, the media did look in on them. This, after all, was drought. A few papers and channels actually sent out a handful of reporters to the countryside. But even drought at its blistering best couldn't match the pull of Lakme India Fashion Week. That had some 400 journalists covering it the same month.

With thousands of farmers taking their own lives, the party still goes on. The Times of India has announced,

at the top of its national page, that the Femina Miss India Contest would be made 'more relevant' to our country. How, remains a closely guarded secret. The same month, farmers suicides got a fraction of the space the more relevant Miss India contest did in the same paper.

**B**esides, as Krugman writes of his own country, there is another aspect to this. Denial of growing inequality 'is a sizeable, well-financed industry. Conservative think-tanks have produced scores of studies that try to discredit the data, the methodology and, not least, the motives of those who report the obvious. Studies that appear to refute claims of increasing inequality receive prominent endorsements on editorial pages and are eagerly cited by right-leaning government officials.'

Sounds so much like home. Where some economists are fascinated by the fall in poverty they see. At least one of them has claimed a decline so rapid that we'd best build a museum to house poverty. We've got to preserve that heritage some place before we lose it altogether. Inequality? How is that a problem?

Nothing spoils the party. Not even the Supreme Court pulling up state governments on the rise in starvation deaths. This October, the court said state chief secretaries would be held responsible for any further hunger deaths. Still, the deaths have continued to mount.

Never mind too that the Planning Commission has fiddled with poverty data. It concedes that some of the data might not be 'strictly comparable' to earlier figures. And more blather on those lines.

Never mind that the Union Minister for Food has also conceded some hard truths. As 2001 set in, he spoke of high levels of hunger in the country.

But there is always that 'well-financed' industry to assert the opposite.

The farce of denial, though, was kept up even as K.R. Narayanan felt forced to say things no President ever has. That too, in a Republic Day speech. He spoke in anguish of an India where 'some kind of a counter revolution is taking place.' Of a society 'increasingly insensitive and callous.' Of 'vulgar indulgence in conspicuous consumption.' And of a 'sullen resentment among the masses against their condition, erupting often in violent forms.'

The Times of India dismissed the speech in less than six inches. The Express blasted it as full of 'the usual lamentations' in an editorial calling for 'Iron in the Soul.' Most others didn't cover it at all.

**T**wo years on, the crisis is much worse. The collapse of small farms unfolds with a sickening brutality. Acute distress in rural India stares us in the face. But too many in the elite don't want to see, let alone understand it. Record piles of foodgrain – close to 60 million tons – rot in this country. A nation where the largest number of those in hunger and absolute poverty in the world reside. That too, can be explained away by those whose heads are crowded by the principles of their brand of economics. Whose hearts are bereft of any principles of humanity.

And the party goes on.

Tacitus despised Nero. His writings on the Emperor show us that. However, he wrote very little about his guests. Those who could pop that fig while human torches burned around them.

But then, come to think of it, the media of our time – the first-drafters of history – are remarkably silent about this side of our own elite. Too many of whom are today just that. Nero's Guests.

# A farmer's perspective

PUSHPA SURENDRA

THE farmers around where I live have not been able to raise any crops of value for the second consecutive year, but the lush growth of vegetation after the recent rains hides their hardship. Fruit trees have discarded their yellowing leaves for fresh ones and fields are covered with a green carpet of weed, horsegram and ragi. The greenery all around presents a picture of perfection, affirming the immense power of nature to heal itself, making it easier for officialdom to forget about implementing drought relief measures until the next 'visible' signs of distress.

The national agricultural policy of the Vajpayee government drawn up by urban academics has little in it that connects to the actual life of farmers in this country. Agricultural policy does not distinguish between the different type of farmers living under different agro-climatic zones and their specific needs. While we may talk of a 'farming community', in reality there is not one farming community but several. The small farmer may only be a tenant of another land owner or may have leased a plot for cultivation. Most farmer's organizations are

dominated by those growing irrigated crops practicing chemical agriculture and are preoccupied with wresting concessions from government, such as free water and electricity. In the absence of organizations that represent the interests of the small farmer, little surprise that government policy neglects the needs of the marginals.

A critical review of past and present agricultural policies in the context of the changing situation of farming is necessary. The time is ripe for a major 'repair' job if we are to avoid serious consequences of neglecting our resource base, i.e. land. Unless environment and agricultural issues are interlinked and reforms brought about in the administrative machinery, there can be no easy solution to the problems of our deteriorating natural resources. Overlapping administrative and bureaucratic structures are a major problem in implementing changes. The question is whether our agricultural policy-makers, conservationists and campaigners for protection of ecology are ready to change their rigid mindset and take a broader view of things.



The average size of land holding, i.e. two acres and below, is considered too small and economically nonviable. Agriculture has been dubbed a 'non-performing sector' and agri-business companies and corporate interests are being encouraged by the present government to make farming more 'viable'. But for who is the question. This discussion of 'viability' is not new. In the 1950s consolidation of farms through cooperatives was considered a solution to the problems of small holdings and their inability for capital investment. Cooperative farming also was considered ideal for our conditions where poor farmers could pool in resources to jointly hire machinery, implements and build common facilities for storage of grains.

**T**he failure of the cooperative system to make any major headway can be attributed to lack of timely credit, poor rural infrastructure, political interference and lack of a spirit of cooperation among farmers and, most importantly, their illiteracy. The government, instead of bringing about reform in the system to make it more responsive to farmers needs, has begun debunk all past structures. Whenever faced with a problem the current trend among politicians is to abdicate their responsibilities and call upon the NGOs and private industry to intervene.

One of the major problems facing farmers is an inability to access credit, which in turn is linked to a faulty land record system. Land survey and settlements have not been carried out in some states for three to four decades and extant records do not reflect the changes in land use over the years. Land survey maps show several decades old information, creating avenues for corruption in the revenue department and for harassment of poor farmers in need of basic documents. Failure to grease the palms of officials

means an endless wait for farmers chasing paper; in all this there is a total lack of respect for their time and agricultural work.

Recently, there has been much publicity for the computerisation of land records scheme instituted by some state governments. RTC (Record of Tenancy and Crops), a basic document a farmer has to produce to avail credit facilities, is now easily available. Though this has brought great relief to the farmers who can get this document within minutes, it has meant computerisation of the faulty record system as it exists. *Kharab* land granted to the landless a few decades back may have been brought under cultivation and changed hands many times, but land survey maps of villages do not record the change. In the absence of a foolproof record system the burden is always on the farmer to prove that the land is no longer *kharab*. Outdated information may show lands to be growing field crops when actually a farmer may be growing horticultural crops and as such extension services of the horticulture department do not reach these farmers.

The assessment being higher for land under horticultural crops, a faulty record system also means the loss of revenue to the government.

**A**gricultural policy also does not cater to the special needs of non-irrigated agriculture. Such lands dependent on the bounty of nature are not given much importance even though social scientists have time and again pointed out that plans made for irrigated agriculture are imposed on the rainfed arid regions with disastrous consequences. For example, chemical agricultural practices, especially the use of pesticides that is liberally practised in canal irrigated conditions, have been the ruin of many farmers in arid areas.

No land, however fertile, can satisfy the ever increasing demand for food and raw materials of industries and urban populations. Agricultural income is unable to support farm families forcing the younger generation to look for wage labour in nearby urban areas. In the absence of basic mechanisation and loss of able-bodied young to agriculture, the old and infirm are unable to complete agricultural work on time. The much talked about mechanization of agriculture has only meant tractorization. Simple labour saving tools are either not available or they are beyond the reach of most marginal farmers.

**I**nterestingly, V.S. Naipaul in his unpopular book *India: A Wounded Civilization* makes some perceptive remarks on the poor quality of implements designed for farmers by the National Institute of Design, a premier institution of the country. In a country that calls farmers the 'backbone' of its economy, agricultural cooperative stores and shops selling harmful agrochemicals do not sell basic protective gear such as gloves and masks.

Our understanding of what constitutes rural poverty needs to undergo a change to reflect the present-day realities of rural life. Despite the neglect of agriculture, the situation of our villages is not the same as prior to independence. The public distribution system has been able to reach remote villages because of the improved transport system. Mass starvation and deprivation once the normal feature during droughts, has considerably reduced. Officialdom, however, wants to see total distress among the rural population for it to reach relief. Little wonder that many of the drought relief measures are simply not implemented because of official apathy in recognizing signs of hardship and even the few remedial measures are

delayed or postponed once there is some rainfall.

Where I live, the failure of the southwest monsoon brings great financial hardship to farmers who look forward to the season with expectation, investing their savings or borrowed money in preparing the fields for sowing, buying seeds and fertilizers. Their main cash earning crops such as cotton and pulses requiring rains at regular intervals fetch better prices in the market. The second crop of ragi and horsegram sown during the northeast monsoon provides basic food security for the family which is supplemented by the rice and other essentials provided through the PDS.

**U**nless there is a surplus most farmers prefer not to sell their second crop especially if they are able to earn enough from the first crop. Cash is important to buy basic necessities like rice, oil, soap, tea and coffee, jaggery, spices and clothes, but in good years they buy gold and other valuables that can be pawned during hardship. The first priority is always given to repaying the debts just as creditors wait for harvest time to demand repayment of dues. Most farmers somehow are able to cope with crop failures for a couple of years but successive failures can cause great hardship to farmers who have no other source of income.

The impact of crop loss on a farming family is gradual and not sudden. It results in several problems for farmers and impacts their health and children's education. Inability to keep up minimum social obligations results in a loss of self-esteem, especially when marriages of grown up girls are cancelled or postponed due to crop failure.

It is in the above context of the failure of government policies to respond to the specific needs of farmers that we have to examine the govern-

ment's intentions in recommending introduction of GM crops and contract farming. Already, the practice of modern agriculture promoted by state institutions has placed the marginal farmer a more precarious situation and spells doom for the country's biodiversity. In this mindset, for example, plants considered 'weeds' are systematically eradicated, even though these 'weeds' may be valuable medicinal or food plants used at the time of scarcity.

Weedicides are literally dumped on farmers since weeds are believed to compete with crops for nutrition. The role of so called 'weeds' in maintaining soil moisture, in preventing pest attacks on crops, in checking soil erosion, in providing healthy habitats for the survival of soil microorganisms and beneficial insects that improve soil quality by recycling nutrients is now an accepted fact. It is during periods of agricultural stress as after prolonged droughts that one can see the value of earlier sustainable agricultural practices.

**E**cologically sustainable agricultural practices have to yet get support from the agricultural establishment and as such fail to make a positive impact on the larger agricultural scene. Organic farming practices are limited to experimental communities or individual farmers and are not supported by policy measures. If proper incentives are given for ecologically sound farming practices it might still be possible to improve the quality of our agricultural lands and save the great expense involved in the manufacture of chemical fertilizers and poisons that goes under the name of agricultural pesticides.

Huge grants are made available to professional scientists, forest department, NGOs and agricultural universities to develop medicinal plant nurseries in unnatural surroundings

when it is possible to conserve them where they occur naturally by encouraging farmers to adopt more tolerant attitudes to so called 'weeds'. If our existing natural environment has to survive for sustaining the life of humans, plants and animals it is necessary that we recognise the interdependence of our forests, agricultural lands, water and mineral resources and the people dependent on them for their livelihoods. Land and water conservation has to start from rural areas.

**C**onservationists ignore the fact that much of the country's productive land is under the ownership of individual cultivators and that without their involvement, protection and conservation of natural resources would remain an impossible dream. Farmlands and plantations are not just home to food crops but hundreds of species of plants, fungi, insects, birds and domesticated animals. Pressure on land to meet demands for food, raw materials for industry and commodities for export is threatening the biodiversity of Indian agriculture. While dry land farming areas provide one type of biodiversity with cultivation of many drought resistant millets and poor man's pulses, plantation areas growing tree crops and commercial crops deserve equal attention by conservationists.

The encroachment on forests by farmers and the pressure on forests by forest-dwellers is often debated, but appropriation of agricultural lands to provide housing and other amenities for the growing urban population rarely receives the same attention by environmentalists and academics. Agricultural lands are acquired by urban development authorities and property speculators but abandoned when real estate prices crash, thus making once cultivable agricultural lands urban wastelands. If environ-

mental laws are enforced to prohibit city dwellers from acquiring property that was once farmland or forests, the 'environmentalism' of a number of conservationists would be put to test. It is a far easier proposition to confine biodiversity conservation to distant forests and evict tribals from forests than to bring about changes in cities.

**T**here are increasing instances of conflict between forest department officials and farmers in the predominantly agricultural districts of the Western Ghats. Farmers point out that increased destruction of crops by wild animals is a recent phenomenon, traceable to the mid-eighties when the forest department resorted to clearing forests near human settlements for implementing social forestry programmes. Even though farmers have lived near forests as cultivators for generations, the destruction of crops on the scale now reported is recent. Not surprisingly though hunting of wild animals is banned, farmers continue to hunt wild boars and monkeys. Hunters with guns are sometimes invited by farmers to free them from wild boar menace.

Farmers living near forests complain that they are unable to grow crops like coconuts, banana, areca and tubers for fear of inviting attention, especially of the elephants. Planters dump jackfruits outside the boundary of their estates to prevent elephants from destroying their crops and more recently by installing electric fences. They blame the government for the mismanagement of forests and for not growing enough species that provide food such as jackfruit, wild banana and rattans that are the favourite of elephants. The issue of compensation in case of destruction of crops by wild animals is another cause for friction between forest officials and farmers. Farmers assess their loss not only in

terms of crops lost, but labour, time and money invested in growing them. But the forest officials refuse to see their point of view.

The forest department earns huge sums of money from the sale of timber from forests that is extracted periodically under the 'dead and wind fallen' category, but it is common knowledge that extraction is not just limited to fallen trees. The department also undertakes auction of timber extracted from private lands collecting heavy sales tax from bulk purchasers of timber. Though 6% of the total value of timber sold is collected as forest development tax for the development of local forests, farmers charge that the money is spent in developing only commercial forestry.

**T**he laws relating to extraction of timber on private lands vary from place to place depending on the type of land holding. Private company owned plantations of a few thousand acres are classified as 'redeemed' category only because the companies had the 'foresight' to pay a nominal fee (probably a few paise) decades ago to the government for getting the redeemed land status. On redeemed lands, timber can be extracted without the payment of any 'valuation' to the forest department.

Valuation is the percentage payable to the government which amounts to fifty five per cent of the total value of timber. The high valuation is meant to deter owners of trees from wanting to sell them. This coupled with rampant corruption amongst officialdom and the delays in the functioning of the forest department bureaucracy frustrates some tree owners and drives them into making deals with smugglers who pay better prices. They are able to pay a higher percentage to the owners essentially because they dodge the system by not paying

the stipulated valuation fee. More often smugglers resort to theft of trees, including sandal trees, from both private lands and the forests. These situations are the ones that establish the nexus between forest department and smugglers like the forest brigand Veerappan who still eludes capture.

**M**ost farmers were afraid to conserve sandalwood trees on their farms and plantations for the trouble it may cause if sandal trees were allowed to grow to full size on their lands. Farmers were worried that the trees on their land would attract smugglers. Earlier sandal was the exclusive property of the government even when on private property and farmers were given no incentive to conserve the trees on their lands. Young plants were destroyed because once they grew big, their existence had to be reported to the authorities. It was the responsibility of the land owner to protect them and theft of trees, if unreported, was punishable under the law.

While sandalwood was the monopoly of the state, the government gave licences to private parties for extraction of oil. The high price of the wood at the government auction depots gave rise to smuggling of trees. Today the rules have been simplified and incentives given to the farmers – 50% of the value of the trees protected on their lands, extracted and brought to depots specially meant for sandalwood. Unfortunately the change in law came much too late, once sandal forests with no natural regeneration are on the verge of extinction in Karnataka. The arrogant attitude of forest officials when dealing with farmers, intimidation they resort to, and not recognising the contribution of farmers in protecting the trees ends up in farmers distrusting the forest department.

Owners of trees are allowed to extract a minimum amount of timber

without paying valuation once they can prove that the timber is for personal use and not sale. Extraction of trees is generally on the increase when prices of agricultural produce fall. Most owners of lands protect naturally growing trees on their lands and even plant more trees as insurance against hard times. Cutting these trees though legal still has a negative impact on the environment particularly when cutting is resorted to during a short span of time when agricultural commodity prices crash.

For example, it is said that timber yards now have no space to stock timber given the present collapse of prices of plantation crops. In recent years, several independent agencies have mushroomed that, for a percentage of the sale price, undertake to liaise with the forest department making it easier for owners to sell timber. Fall in agricultural prices has had consequences of its own, not just for agriculture but also the natural resources and biodiversity.

**M**ost planters do plant tree saplings in thousands on their lands but their preference is for fast growing species like the silver oak that are ready for harvest in 20 years time rather than locally found varieties that take longer to mature. Mangium, another fast growing tree, was popularised by the forest department but is not preferred as the branches are susceptible to breaking during heavy rains, thereby damaging the crops. No one prefers growing local varieties but they do conserve naturally occurring tree seedlings on their lands if it does not interfere with the crops. The forest department itself is not keen on planting slow growing local varieties of trees.

**10** Government extension services to farmers do not see the link between trees and conservation of water and soil. When recommending new crops

to farmers they do not take into consideration water availability in a particular area because basic hydrological data are not available for most rural areas. The agricultural university based research focus is on developing high yielding, pest resistant and drought resistant varieties of crops but they have no say in the matter of implementation of policy. Increasingly research is also dictated by availability of funding from the corporate sector. Naturally agricultural universities and CSIR institutions are also only interested in research that meets the needs of their paymasters.

**O**ne could go on endlessly about the neglected issues of agriculture of which there is not just one type in our vast country blessed with several agro-climatic zones. I can only say that agricultural policy, planning and programmes do not have farmers and farming at the centre of policy-making as it is for example in the case of food processing where farmers are only suppliers of raw materials to urban entrepreneurs. Institutions like the CFTRI that came into existence in the name of providing assistance to farmers actually help only private investors with capital and train individuals who can pay high fees in food processing skills.

It is very difficult to make urban dwellers, however knowledgeable about the workings of the agricultural economy and that of agriculture within the larger economy, to understand the day-to-day problems of those living in rural areas. I have tried through some examples from the semi-arid zone where I now live and the plantation area where I grew up, to present a small picture of the daily attrition that the agriculturist has to face and survive. In writing this I hope that agriculturists will one day be given their due space and recognition.

# When will we get a comparative perspective?

OMKAR GOSWAMI

FOR a country whose myriad cultures have hardly any tradition of history or historiography, we are a surprisingly sturdy 'time-series' people. We are perpetually comparing ourselves today with how we were five or ten years ago. For instance, Remember 1992, when the only domestic airline was Indian Airlines? Remember how bad the food and service was, and how difficult it was to get a ticket on demand to suddenly fly to Bombay? Now, look at the difference! We have three airlines competing with each other. There are 27 daily flights between Delhi and Mumbai (tragically, Bombay, Calcutta and Madras got lumpenised in the jet

stream of linguistic chauvinism that was perhaps the only 'human face' of liberalisation). Only last week, my nephew Guttu went to the airport, used his credit card and hopped on to the next available flight. And, what about credit cards?

Time series makes for comforting comparisons. After all, India has progressed substantively since the horrible days of May 1991, when we had barely three weeks worth of foreign currency reserves, astronomical import tariffs, pervasive quotas, myriad administered interest rates, public sector reservations, and a licence-control-permit *raj* from the tip of the hair to the

toenails. More power to India for all the changes that have occurred in the last 11 years.

But, are the changes good enough? As you can imagine, this question can hardly be answered by the time series approach. It requires a 'cross-sectional' mentality—one that asks where India stands vis-à-vis her competitors in Asia. This is where the problem lies. We as a nation are so insular in our worldview and so good at self-congratulation that we fail to see how far others have progressed over the last dozen years compared to us.

**T**his article is an exercise in comparison of some critical social and economic indicators. As we know very well, Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee has sounded the clarion cry for 8 per cent GDP growth for the next decade. Heady stuff this, especially in a milieu where the economy has been hard-pressed to cross 5.5 per cent growth. Achieving this in an increasingly integrated world economy requires quantum leaps in global competitiveness. And, there are at least four critical macroeconomic determinants of such competitiveness. These are (i) the quality of the present and future labour force, (ii) the quality of physical, social and financial infrastructure, (iii) extent of openness of the economy, and (iv) efficiency of the government's fiscal management. Let's discuss each of these at some level of quantitative detail.

A necessary condition for sustaining competitiveness is the present and future quality of labour force. This will become critical in this century, given the key role that will be played by knowledge inputs in all spheres of economic activity. How do we fare vis-à-vis Asia in terms of basic indicators such as infant mortality, life expectancy at birth, and adult female and male literacy?

It's useful to begin with birth. A country's infant mortality rate is a robust indicator of the extent of genuine development—for it underscores the state of a delivering mother's health, her household's income and capabilities to access health facilities, and the extent to which such facilities are available for the citizens as a whole. From the time-series perspective, India seems to have done pretty well over the last decade. In 1992, 79 infants died out of every 1,000 live births. By 2000, this had dropped to 69—a creditable fall of 13 per cent in eight years.

However, as Table 1 shows, India compares abysmally with the rest of Asia that matters. Our infant mortality is 8.5 times that of Malaysia's, over 4.5 times that of Sri Lanka's, twice that of China's and almost 2.5 times that of the Asian average.

**R**egarding life expectancy at birth, India has again performed quite creditably if we look at things in a time-series way. The average Indian who was born in 1992 could expect to live for 61 years. In 2000, this average had increased to 63 years. Table 2, however, gives the cross-sectional perspective and demonstrates that India lags far, far behind other Asian countries. The average child born in 2000 in Malay-

sia, South Korea and Sri Lanka is expected to live 16 per cent longer than in India; the average Chinese 11 per cent longer; and the average non-Indian Asian 10 per cent longer. It has everything to do with the social transformation in these countries, which have reduced mass poverty, increased nutrition and nourishment, and have thus raised the expected life of the people.

**L**et's now look at basic education—the backbone of growth of any knowledge-based economy. Tables 3(a) and 3(b) give the data on adult male and adult female illiteracy in 1991 and 2000. In passing, it ought to be mentioned that India's criterion for literacy is very low. All that is needed for a person to prove that s(he) is literate is to be able to write his or her name. Even so, India has certainly progressed. Illiteracy among adult males has dropped by 16 per cent in nine years; and among adult females by 14 per cent. However, as in infant mortality and life expectancy, we lie at the bottom of the heap. And, despite our much vaunted statistic of the number of graduate engineers produced per year, India has a very long way to go before she can claim to have an adult literacy level that can sustain 8 per

TABLE 1

Infant Mortality (per 1,000 live births), 1992 and 2000

	1992	2000
Malaysia	15	8
Korea, Rep.	11	8
Sri Lanka	18	15
Vietnam	37	27
Thailand	34	28
<b>Mean</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>29</b>
Philippines	36	31
China	38	32
Indonesia	55	41
<b>India</b>	<b>79</b>	<b>69</b>

Source: World Development Report.

TABLE 2

Life Expectancy at Birth, 1992 and 2000 (in years)

	1992	2000
Malaysia	71	73
South Korea	71	73
Sri Lanka	72	73
China	69	70
<b>Mean</b>	<b>68</b>	<b>69</b>
Philippines	66	69
Thailand	70	69
Vietnam	67	69
Indonesia	63	66
<b>India</b>	<b>61</b>	<b>63</b>

Source: World Development Report.

cent GDP growth on a sustained basis for a decade or more – something that is a must if we hope to eliminate mass poverty by 2015.

What about the second macro-economic factor that determines competitiveness and growth – the state of our physical infrastructure? Of late, we have been regularly touting our progress in the making of national highways. This is indeed true. Financed by the Re. 1 cess per litre of petrol and diesel and monitored with uncharacteristic gusto by the Prime Minister's Office, the highways programme has been moving at a brisk pace. Contracts have been awarded for constructing every kilometre of the 5,846 km Golden Quadrilateral Highways Programme; and as I write, a quarter of this length is already four-laned, while the residual three-quarters is under implementation. In June 2002, I travelled from Delhi to Dalhousie, and can vouch for the fact that the

highway was a dream right up to Jalandhar.

**A**nd, yet, does it compare with the highways development programme in Malaysia, or even China? Today, China has over 120,000 kms of either four- or six-laned highways, and the government is determined to add another 30,000 km by the time Beijing holds the Olympics in 2008. Travel out of Shanghai to points north, west and south and you will see that the quality of these cemented highways are world class – far, far ahead of the bituminised roads that we lay out in India. According to the *Global Competitiveness Report 2001-02*, the quality of Malaysia's roads is 10.6 percent better than the global average; Thailand's is 12.8 per cent better; China's is 6.4 per cent worse; while India's is 23 per cent worse. Again, we are pretty close to the bottom of the pack.

We have certainly progressed a great deal as far as telephones go. Prior to 1990, an average urban Indian without connections and 'pulls' had to wait at least two years – more typically three to four – before getting a fixed line connection. Today, consumers in the main metros and some other large cities get telephones virtually on demand. Unheard of even in 1995, there are over 6 million cellular phone subscribers in India today, and it is the most rapidly growing telephony sector in the country.

As we are often told, farmers in the Punjab and western Uttar Pradesh use cell phones all the time, while fishermen in Kerala use mobiles to decide which port is offering the best prices for their daily catch. Great stuff! Now consider the situation in China. Dragon land has over 95 million cell phone users, and is adding more subscribers per month than India does per year. Today, our cell phone density is about to touch 1 per cent. China's is almost

9 per cent; Malaysia's is at the developed country level of 60 per cent.

As far as power supply goes, the less said the better. Per capita power consumption in India is a mere 379 kwh per year, compared to 758 kwh in China and 1,352 kwh in China. And, thanks to rampant cross-subsidisation and ridiculous pricing policies of almost all state electricity boards, we still had a peak demand shortage of 12.5 per cent in 2000-01 – something that shows no signs of abating in the near future. Today, over 70 per cent of manufacturing units rely on their own generator sets – a percentage unheard of in China and throughout South-East and East Asia.

Let's now move on to the third macroeconomic factor behind competitiveness, namely, the extent of openness of the economy – or the share of foreign trade in a country's

TABLES 3(a) and (b)

Adult Male and Female Illiteracy (%), 1991 and 2000		
Male	1991	2000
Korea, Rep.	1.5	0.9
Thailand	4.4	2.9
Vietnam	5.4	4.5
Philippines	6.7	4.5
Sri Lanka	7.0	5.6
Indonesia	12.5	8.2
<b>Mean</b>	<b>11.1</b>	<b>8.3</b>
China	12.9	8.4
Malaysia	12.4	8.6
<b>India</b>	<b>37.4</b>	<b>31.6</b>
Female	1991	2000
Korea, Rep.	6.2	3.6
Philippines	7.7	4.9
Thailand	9.9	6.1
Vietnam	12.6	8.6
Sri Lanka	14.8	11.0
<b>Mean</b>	<b>21.9</b>	<b>16.3</b>
Malaysia	24.3	16.6
Indonesia	26.2	18.0
China	31.9	23.7
<b>India</b>	<b>63.1</b>	<b>54.6</b>

Source: World Development Report.

TABLE 4(a)

Foreign Trade in Goods and Services as  
a Percentage of GDP, 1991 and 2000

	1991	2000
Malaysia	159.3	231.0
Thailand	78.5	125.9
Philippines	62.2	106.5
Vietnam	63.7	102.0
Sri Lanka	67.6	90.2
Korea, Rep.	57.7	86.5
Indonesia	49.9	74.1
China	35.5	49.1
<b>India</b>	<b>18.1</b>	<b>30.5</b>

Source: World Development Report.

TABLE 4(b)

Average Unweighted Import Tariff(%),  
2001

	2001
Thailand	3.7
Sri Lanka	7.4
Philippines	8.3
Korea, Rep.	8.6
Indonesia	8.9
Malaysia	9.5
China	17.0
Vietnam	17.5
<b>India</b>	<b>27.2</b>

Source: World Development Report.

GDP as well as the level of import tariffs. 'Openness' matters for many reasons, of which two are particularly important. First, greater share of imports at globally competitive prices reduces domestic cost of production and, hence, increases competitiveness and growth. And, second, greater share of exports in GDP creates an environment that rewards international quality, best-in-class delivery and competitive, global price conscious export-oriented businesses. Here too, as Tables 4(a) and 4(b) show, India is at the bottom of the pole: her share of foreign trade in GDP is the lowest in Asia (and this includes our software exports), while her import tariff is the highest in Asia.

**T**he fourth macroeconomic determinant of competitiveness is management of the exchequer. Fiscal prudence is critical on three grounds. First, consistently high general government deficits are unsustainable in the long run, and raise the cost of capital in the medium term to uncompetitive levels. Second, deficits prompt 'crowding out', which adversely affects private sector investment. And third, there is an adverse signalling effect – which says to all and sundry that the govern-

ment cannot control the exchequer. As Table 5 shows, India scores very poorly on the deficit front. The data is for 2000-01. By the end of this fiscal year, the combined deficit of central and state governments will exceed 11 per cent of GDP. We are rapidly heading for an internal debt trap.

So, while we may have been doing quite well over the 1990s (though, even that's not true for fiscal management after 1996), we are really way behind the curve compared to the rest of Asia that counts. That brings me to the second, and shorter, part of this article. Suppose fairy godmother loved our prime minister and granted him the wish for 8 per cent GDP growth over the next dozen years. What would that mean in terms of sectoral growth? And, even after attaining such a blitzkrieg rate of growth, where would we be compared to China?

**O**ur growth in software and IT is quite staggering, and there is absolutely no reason why, fuelled by this growth, the services sector cannot grow at something like 8.5 per cent per year. Incidentally, this is an incredibly high long term rate of growth – for it implies that the service sector will double its real income every eight and half years. Even so, that won't be enough to trigger an overall 8 per cent GDP growth. Given that we are a country of over a billion people, and that agriculture will not grow at a rate much more than 2 per cent per year, 8 per cent GDP growth is feasible if and only if the industrial sector grows at a constant real rate of 11 per cent per year.

After five horrible years of declining growth rates, industrial sector growth has picked up to 7 per cent over the last eight months, and the estimate is that the year will end with an average of 6.5 per cent growth. But that's a long way from getting 11 per

cent growth year on year for the next twelve years. It seems like a Herculean task – not entirely impossible but in today's context, extremely difficult. However, if it were to happen, then the share of the industrial sector will rise from the present ridiculously low level of 26 per cent of GDP to 38 per cent in 2015.

By the way, that is no great shakes. Today, China's and Malaysia's share of industry is 51 per cent of GDP; Korea's is 42 per cent; and Thailand's is 40 per cent. In other words, even if Indian industry grows at this spectacular long term rate, our share of industrial output in GDP will still be substantially less than China's and Malaysia's, and lower than Thailand's and Korea's.

**M**oreover, attaining 8 per cent GDP growth over the next twelve years implies a growing gap between domestic savings and India's investment needs – a gap that has to be bridged by foreign direct and portfolio investments. Today, India attracts not much more than \$6 billion of foreign direct as well as portfolio investment per year. If we were to attain 8 per cent GDP growth, the foreign investment needs will rise to \$25 billion per year by 2010 and \$35 billion by 2015. The numbers look staggering. But, it is worth remembering that a country called China has been raking in \$45 billion of foreign investment per year over the last decade and that, in 2002, it will have got close to \$60 billion.

So, in a fundamental way, how we rank vis-à-vis Asia will be determined by this nation's appetite for rapid and sustained reforms. If the last five years is any guide, we seem to be two-steps forward, one-step back and three-steps sideways kind of economy. However, miracles do happen and, the Lord knows, we too can become reform oriented superstars.

TABLE 5

Overall Government Deficit as a Percentage of GDP, 2000	
	<i>Fiscal deficit/surplus</i>
Korea	1.0
Chile	0.1
Mexico	-1.1
Thailand	-2.2
China	-2.7
Indonesia	-3.3
Philippines	-4.1
Brazil	-4.3
Vietnam	-4.8
Malaysia	-5.8
Sri Lanka	-9.4
<b>India</b>	<b>-10.1</b>

Source: World Development Report.



**L**et me outline a few reforms that we need in the next two years to create an environment that can facilitate this 8 per cent growth. These are only some reforms, not all. Here's a way in which readers can judge for themselves.

1. Will the Electricity Bill be passed?
2. Will we raise electricity tariffs to cover at least marginal cost?
3. Will we make the bankrupt State Electricity Boards efficient and truly autonomous?
4. Will we privatise transmission and distribution?
5. Will we succeed in attracting FDI and domestic investments first in transmission and distribution and then in generation?
6. Will we bring about sweeping changes in the Industrial Disputes Act, Factories Act and Contract Labour Act to impart greater flexibility in labour laws?
7. Will all small scale reservations be removed?
8. Will we bring down import tariff lines to only two rates, 10 per cent and 20 per cent, thus reducing our trade-weighted tariff to 12 per cent?
9. Will we properly implement a genuine VAT regime by 2003?
10. Will there be just two rates of excise duty, 8 per cent and 16 per cent?
11. Average port and customs delay for importing is 10 days. Will ports be modernised and privatised to eliminate delays?
12. Will we repeal SICA and BIFR and replace these with expeditious bankruptcy restructuring and liquidation processes?
13. Will we cut Statutory Liquidity Ratio from 25 per cent to no more than 10 per cent?
14. Will we privatise two smaller state owned banks in 2003, followed by three more in 2004, and then the rest between 2005 and 2008?
15. Will we allow up to 74 per cent FDI in all banks, including state owned

banks, and remove the 10 per cent cap on voting rights?

16. Will we allow foreign partners of private insurance companies to raise ownership to 100 per cent?

17. Will we legislate the Fiscal Responsibility Bill with well-defined caps on fiscal deficit, revenue deficit and public debt?

18. Will we see sustained reforms in fiscal parameters to set the stage for full capital account convertibility by 2005?

19. Will we free telecom, insurance, banking, retailing and print media to 100 per cent FDI?

20. Will we radically step up our privatisation programme?

21. Will the road programme continue to move at the same rapid pace?

22. Will there be a similar cess financed programme for modernising the railway system?

23. Will we see radical land market reforms?

Give 2 points to each question if you think the reform will be carried out in the next two years. Give 1 if you think there's a 50:50 chance. And otherwise. If the score is 0-20, forget about 8 per cent growth. If it is 21-35, maybe there's some chance. If it is above 35, then we can look forward to 8 per cent.

**F**inally, suppose we do manage 8 per cent GDP growth right up to 2015, how will we stack up with China, the other huge country in Asia? If the dragon continues growing at 8 per cent, as most expect it will, China's per capita GDP (in constant 1995 US dollars) will still be 133 per cent higher than India's. Sobering thought, isn't it? Shows how far behind we are, and how hard it will be to play catch up. I just have one question: How come our worthies in Parliament don't think about this? Maybe that explains why we are where we are – and why we revel in time-series, instead of cross-section.

# Salvage reforms

GAJENDRA HALDEA

No man can be the judge of his own cause, so goes an age-old dictum. This is also a basic tenet of jurisprudence in a democratic polity. In cricket too, a player can't be an umpire if the game is to be worthwhile. Yet, in pursuit of economic reforms in India, this very principle has been compromised time and again.

The command and control structure of the economy that India adopted post-independence was a corollary of the socialistic philosophy of that era. It gave vast powers to government functionaries in the guise of public interest. They ran the nation's economy through Public Sector Undertakings (PSUs) and the licence-permit raj. Over time, perpetuation of government control virtually became an end in itself while the laudable objectives of socialism took a backseat.

The crisis of 1991 spelt the end of business as usual and economic liberalisation became imperative. The captains in government and in the PSUs, however, were unwilling to part

with the considerable fiefdoms that they had acquired. Being in positions of control, they redefined reforms all the time with an eye on their turf. In the process, policies often got subverted and their implementation was compromised.

That explains why reforms in India moved so very slowly in several critical areas. Ten years of 'liberalisation' in the power sector have brought little tangible gain; a network of toll roads is still a far cry; private participation in airports has not taken off at all; ports have improved marginally; the railways have only deteriorated; and divestment of state-owned enterprises moved at a snail's pace except during the past two years. Only the telecom sector has surged ahead in the recent past. An all-pervasive 'conflict of interest' seems to have plagued governance in these areas. Are there any lessons to learn?

Going back in history, the administrative system that evolved in India during the colonial era embodied the

principle that no one should sit in judgment over his own cause. This proposition was also enshrined in common law as adopted in India. It also became an inviolate norm in judicial functioning, so much so that if a litigant expressed any misgivings about the impartiality of a judge, the latter was expected to transfer the matter to another court. It was recognised that in public affairs, a subjective or partisan approach had no place.

**T**he founding fathers of the Constitution of India carried this principle to its logical conclusion. The Constitution thus prohibits legislators, other than ministers, from holding any office of profit in the government with a view to maintaining separation between the legislature and the executive. Independence of the judiciary is jealously guarded.

The Constitution has also created other authorities such as the Comptroller and Auditor General, Election Commission and Public Service Commissions to perform their roles independently and objectively, without fear or favour. The incumbents are forbidden from accepting post retirement employment from the government lest the lure of favours clouds their judgment while dealing with the latter. Such provisions were necessary as a democratic polity relies heavily on checks and balances. Constitutional democracies in other parts of the world have acted likewise.

In the numerous tribunals and regulatory commissions functioning in India under different laws, a serving member cannot have any subsisting personal interest in the subject matter of his jurisdiction. Similarly, laws governing the conduct of companies require a director to abstain from board deliberations if he has a personal interest in the agenda under consideration.

During the last presidential election in the United States, Governor Bush of Florida refrained from intervening in matters affecting his candidate brother, citing conflict of interest as the rationale. The President of Nasdaq stock exchange is required to divest himself of his broking business before taking office (it took several years before SEBI in India ruled that brokers cannot be directors on a stock exchange). The Attorney General of USA stayed away from Enron related investigations, as he was recipient of political donations from the company.

During an earlier term of the Labour government in UK, it was revealed that the Labour Party had accepted large donations from organisers of the motor racing Formula 1 Grand Prix events (which were heavily dependent on tobacco advertising), and the government had later agreed to continue the exemption of motor racing from the ban on public advertising of cigarettes. Following much controversy and embarrassment, the party refunded the donations (but the exemption stayed).

**M**ore recently, the Labour government was under pressure as a result of its links with Enron. The company had funded a number of Labour Party events, and admitted it did so to facilitate access to ministers. Subsequently, the government took a number of decisions such as releasing the moratorium on building gas-fired power stations, for which Enron had been lobbying.

Public life in USA, UK and other developed democracies is galore with examples where the evidence of any conflict of interest is instantly recognised and adequately addressed. The constant vigil of public awareness does not tolerate any lapses once they are detected. The raging controversy in the USA regarding acceptance of

lucrative consulting assignments by the auditors of Enron and the intense pressure of public opinion in favour of banning auditors from accepting other jobs that may cause conflict of interest is a case in point.

**C**onflict of interest and judging one's own cause are two sides of the same coin. Be it a court judgment, board decision or policy formulation, conflict of interest leads to outcomes that tend to be fundamentally flawed. Western democracies keep resolving such conflicts as and when they surface. The level of awareness in India being comparatively low, conflicts of interest tend to persist in several areas of public affairs. As a result, delinquent individuals and institutions get away with mayhem.

A survey of economic reforms suggests how persistent interventions of incumbent stakeholders have compromised the outcome. There is no dearth of instances where conflicts of interest are conveniently brushed aside until a crisis or scam forces some action. Routinely, government functionaries who benefit from the powers and privileges of the existing system are entrusted with the task of change and reform that would strike at the very roots of their own authority and patronage. It is only to be expected that they would devise policies aimed at protecting their fiefdoms.

Take the case of power reforms in India. The law enacted soon after independence had created a nationalised industry consisting of the vertically integrated State Electricity Boards (SEBs). These monolithic SEBs were virtually bankrupt by the 1980s and their mounting losses ruled out the possibility of large investments necessary for creation of additional capacity. Reforms became an imperative for improving operations and enabling private participation. Besides

the central government, Orissa was the first state to initiate power reforms and seven other states have since followed that path.

Power reforms in India have broadly comprised (a) setting up of independent regulatory commissions for determination of tariffs; (b) enabling private investment; (c) unbundling of SEBs and corporatisation of the generation, transmission and distribution segments; and (d) privatisation of state-owned entities. These are briefly described below.

Regulatory commissions were considered necessary for depoliticising and rationalising tariffs. This was also seen as a device for increasing tariffs, which meant more funds in the hands of incumbent players. It, therefore, received their support.

**I**n 1993, private investment, domestic as well as foreign, was opened up in generation, followed by a similar move in the transmission segment four years later. But such investments could only be made through long-term agreements with state-owned SEBs. Thus government functionaries retained control through monopolistic agreements. Producers were not free to sell their produce directly to consumers, bulk or retail. This was a welcome measure for incumbent players; and the chosen private producers also favoured long-term agreements with state-owned entities in order to mitigate their risks and seek higher prices.

Despite willingness on the part of government functionaries, private investments in generation and transmission could not fructify on the basis of contracts with SEBs simply because they were perceived as bankrupt entities. Financial institutions were unwilling to finance projects based on monopolistic contracts where payment defaults by SEBs would cause

the projects to go bust because they were not allowed to sell to anyone else. On the other hand, some of the cases where private investments fructified led to disastrous consequences such as in Dabhol.

Unbundling and corporatisation of SEBs meant introduction of commercial discipline and threat of subsequent privatisation. This was stoutly opposed by employee unions and associations. However, when the respective governments agreed to protect their service conditions through appropriate legislative guarantees, they fell in line. Eight states have so far unbundled their SEBs.

**P**rivatisation of state-owned distribution companies was first undertaken in Orissa about four years ago. But it was based on creation of private monopolies. Control over the power sector was thus apportioned between chosen private entities and incumbent government functionaries through a chain of interconnected monopolies—public and private. Absence of competition and choice inevitably led to rising tariffs and poor quality of service. The recent privatisation of distribution companies in Delhi is also based on a similar model and the dominant private players happen to be the same in both the states. It is unlikely that the outcome in Delhi would be materially different from Orissa.

The above illustrates how reform strategies were influenced by incumbent players to protect their turf. In the process, consumer interest and economic growth took a beating. Tariffs have risen significantly while the quality of service remains poor. Even after a decade of reforms, investments are confined to the public sector and the industry remains virtually nationalised.

The world over, successful power reforms—in developed as well

as developing countries—were predicated upon introduction of competition and open access leading to efficiency and price gains for the consumer. In India, a producer of power can sell his produce to a state-owned entity alone; he cannot access the market or a consumer, howsoever large. That is precisely what incumbent players seem to be perpetuating in India and the outcome is there for everyone to see. The power sector in India seems where it was in 1991, perhaps, worse.

**T**he story of reform in the highways sector is no different. Starved of funds in the mid-1990s, the incumbent players settled for public-private partnerships through the BOT (Build Operate and Transfer) approach. A fairly elaborate framework was evolved and approved by the central government way back in 1997. This included a tolling policy for imposing user charges on four-lane national highways, and a stretch of 100 km. was successfully tolled in 1998.

With great fanfare, the National Highway Development Programme was launched in 1999. It consisted of the golden quadrilateral connecting the metros of Delhi, Mumbai, Chennai and Kolkata and the east-west, north-south corridor, all adding up to about 13,000 km. It gave highway development the priority that it had long deserved. As reforms were gathering momentum, the central government imposed a cess on motor fuels to augment resource availability for the sector.

Things changed when cess revenues became available to incumbent players. They took over reins of the entire programme and private participation was quietly buried. A fully evolved BOT project, the Jaipur-Kishengharh section of National Highway-8 was served a lethal blow and

made financially unviable by requiring construction of six lanes as against four lanes in the rest of the golden quadrilateral. That caused this single BOT project to languish, enabling incumbent players to declare that private investment was not forthcoming. That was justification enough for awarding construction contracts at breakneck speed.

**T**o show some progress on private participation, a few highway projects were awarded on annuity basis. The scheme was based on deferred budgetary payments by the government in place of toll collection by the concessionaire. Annuity scheme was what construction companies preferred because they took no traffic risks and got assured bi-annual payments from the government. So where private participation did take place on a limited scale, it was designed to suit the preferences of construction companies, public interest and international experience on toll roads notwithstanding.

Seeing the extravaganza enabled by cess funds, there was no stopping the construction contracts. Huge borrowings were contracted for multiplying the funding for this programme even though such commercial borrowings for road construction were hitherto unknown. The World Bank and Asian Development Bank also stepped in with loans of a couple of billion dollars, never mind the accretion to fiscal deficit and setback to the reform agenda.

No government can go on building roads out of debt funds. As soon as the borrowing option gets exhausted, the programme will suffer a setback. Instead, privatised toll roads could have expanded faster without much burden on the exchequer. A great opportunity to build self-sustaining highways was thus missed.

Incumbent players explain that government would undertake direct tolling after construction is completed. This implies yet another series of tolling contracts across the country. It would be perplexing to any independent observer why construction should be contracted out to one set of contractors, maintenance to another and tolling to yet another. A simple BOT toll road arrangement as it prevails in the rest of the world allows a single concessionaire (private entity) to do all this in a far more efficient and cost-effective manner; but that presupposes parting of control by incumbent players.

Some of the states have since ventured into the BOT approach for attracting private investment in state highways. Ostensibly, the objective seems right. But a closer look in case after case reveals that the design of BOT contracts is largely intended to suit the preferences of incumbent government functionaries and construction companies. In a manner of speaking, this is akin to distribution of spoils. Efficiency and economy in investments, or even consumer welfare, seem fairly low in their order of priorities.

**R**eforms in telecom were initiated in early 1990s and following open competitive bidding, licences were granted for basic and cellular telephony in 1995-96. In the absence of an independent regulator, interconnection and other agreements could not be finalised as the incumbent Department of Telecom (DOT) virtually set conditions that lenders and private investors were unable to accept. In the meanwhile, other developments overtook the process and the licences began to be perceived as unviable. Though an independent statutory regulator (the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India) was constituted in

1997, it could not resolve matters as the requisite policy changes were not forthcoming from DOT. Clearly, the expectation that DOT would help promote competition against itself was flawed.

**I**n order to resolve the continuing stalemate and respond to the demands of private investors, the government set up a Group of Ministers under the chairmanship of Jaswant Singh, then Deputy Chairman, Planning Commission/Minister for External Affairs. The setting up of this group outside DOT enabled formulation of an independent policy that balanced the conflicting viewpoints of prospective investors and the incumbent operator, the DOT. The National Telecom Policy (NTP), 1999 as formulated by the Group, laid the foundation of telecom reforms and galvanised the sector leading to a growth of 19.6% in 2002, next only to China.

The spectacular growth of tele-density, massive inflows of private capital, phenomenal infusion of technology, intense competition, efficiency improvements and lower consumer tariffs are here to stay. Economic growth has thus been facilitated. The lesson is writ large; reform strategies must be formulated and implemented outside the control of incumbent players. Absence of a level playing field does not augur well for growth and progress.

In the implementation of NTP 1999, several issues have since cropped up. It is DOT that determines the policy on matters not covered by NTP 1999; and it tends to help itself to the detriment of its private sector competitors. When the incumbent operator also doubles up as the policy-maker, partisan policies are inevitable. The rising levels of discomfort among private players and the increasing litigation are symptoms of this

malady. It is time for another independent group to formulate NTP-II, if the momentum of growth is to be sustained. Better still, an independent arrangement should be institutionalised.

**I**ndian Railways continue to run on a monolithic inward looking model. Several attempts to introduce reforms and restructuring were stillborn. Being a closed organisation that does not entertain much external scrutiny, it determines its own policies and strategies largely on the basis of internal perceptions and compulsions. Few external checks and balances are available by way of self-correcting mechanisms. The vast potential of railways thus lies substantially untapped. On the contrary, a steady deterioration in many of its fundamentals is obvious to any observer.

Given the mould in which railways seem to operate, there is little hope of substantive reforms. It is futile to expect that incumbent players will be harbingers of change. Railways may thus continue to deteriorate unless a multi-disciplinary Railway Commission consisting of eminent persons is set up for devising a reform strategy that would rejuvenate this sector.

For the past several years, there has been talk of privatising the major airports. Here again, incumbent players have been devising the reform strategy over the years. If lessons of other sectors were any indication, successful privatisation would remain elusive as long as incumbent players continue to determine the strategy. If and when privatisation occurs, conflict of interest may well deliver flawed outcomes.

Reforms in ports, water supply and urban infrastructure are undergoing similar centrifugal pulls. Progress

is, therefore, visible only in fits and starts.

Telecom reforms can be truly regarded as a success story. Though much ground remains to be covered, what has happened so far is truly of monumental proportions when compared to any other sector. The consumer and the economy share a win-win situation. If such history could be created in the telecom sector, others can surely learn a few lessons.

Another success story that proves the benefits of liberalisation and competition is the policy of open skies. When the monopoly of Indian Airlines ceased and competition was introduced, domestic air travel improved by leaps and bounds.

Creation of a Ministry of Disinvestment has ensured divestment of several government-owned companies. There has been a sea change in the progress of disinvestment after the ministry started functioning. This has proved how important it is to empower an independent entity to carry forward the process of reform and change, unshackled by the forces of incumbent players.

**W**rit large in these illustrations is the lesson that no person should be the judge of his own cause. It is unrealistic to expect ministers and officials to pursue reforms that would truncate their powers, particularly when contracts and fiefdoms are at stake. It is vain to expect that governance can succeed when fundamental principles of human behaviour are overlooked.

The telecom revolution in India would be unthinkable if DOT was in the driver's seat. The traveller's plight could not have improved if Indian Airlines had determined the open sky policy. Would anyone have expected the Ministry of Petroleum to carry out disinvestment of its PSUs if it was in

control of the process of disinvestment?

If the lessons are clear and beyond doubt, should anyone expect the incumbent players in power sector to part with their monopolistic stranglehold and let the sector open up? Would you expect incumbent players to give away national highways to private sector concessionaires? Is it realistic to expect incumbent players to privatise railways or airport operations? Would local authorities voluntarily give up their control over water supply or urban infrastructure?

**I**ncumbent players acting in tandem with entrenched interests can not only subvert reforms but also hijack governance. For reforms to proceed in the best interests of the nation, the evolution of a process that vests decision-making in individuals or bodies free of any conflict of interest is a prerequisite. Failure to recognise this basic tenet of governance will only compromise development and economic growth.

In developed countries, their respective finance ministries have guided the reform strategy particularly in critical areas such as infrastructure services. In the Indian context, the Finance Ministry does not seem sufficiently empowered to carry out this task. Incumbent players can thus formulate self-serving policies. In addition, partisan law making is also common, suggesting the need for an independent Economic Laws Commission.

If the methodologies and processes continue to be inadequate, and players act as umpires, can there be hope of successful reforms? The challenge facing the government is not reforms per se; it lies in empowering an independent forum to formulate reform strategies. Indeed, the horse will have to come before the cart.

# The two faces of Dhirubhai Ambani

PARANJOY GUHA THAKURTA

HE achieved what almost everybody would consider impossible. In a life spanning 69 years, he built from scratch India's largest privately controlled corporate empire. Dhirajlal Hirachand—better known as Dhirubhai—Ambani would often say that success was his biggest enemy. He was a man who aroused extreme responses in others. Either you loved him or you hated him. There was just no way you could have been indifferent to this amazing entrepreneur who thought

big, acted tough, knew how to bend rules or have rules bent for him. He was a visionary as well as a manipulator, a man who communicated with the rich and the poor with equal felicity, who was generous beyond the call of duty with those whom he liked and utterly ruthless with his rivals—a man of many parts, of irreconcilable contrasts and paradoxes galore.

Dhirubhai Ambani expired on Saturday July 6, roughly ten minutes before midnight, at Mumbai's Breach

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Candy Hospital where he had been admitted after he suffered a vascular stroke on the evening of June 24. This was his second stroke – the first had occurred more than sixteen years earlier, in February 1986, leaving the right side of his body paralysed. At his cremation, the well-heeled rubbed shoulders with the ordinary. No Indian businessman ever attracted the kind of crowd that Dhirubhai did on his last journey. After his cremation on the evening of Sunday July 7, his elder son Mukesh reminded those gathered on the occasion that in 1957, when Dhirubhai arrived in Mumbai from Aden in Yemen, he had only Rs 500 in his pocket.

**H**e was not exactly a pauper since Rs 500 meant much more than what the amount means in this day and age. Nevertheless, one could not ask for a more spectacular 'rags-to-riches' tale. The second son of a poorly paid school-teacher from Chorwad village in Gujarat, he stopped studying after the tenth standard and decided to join his elder brother, Ramniklal, who was working in Aden at that time. (Not surprisingly, Dhirubhai ensured that his two sons went to premier educational institutions in the US – Mukesh was educated at Stanford University and Anil at the Wharton School of Business.)

The first job Dhirubhai held in Aden was that of an attendant in a gas station. Half a century later, he would become chairman of a company that owned the largest oil refinery in India and the fifth largest refinery in the world, that is, Reliance Petroleum Limited which owns the refinery at Jamnagar that has an annual capacity to refine up to 27 million tonnes of crude oil.

When he died, the Reliance group of companies that Dhirubhai led had a gross annual turnover in the region of Rs 75,000 crore or close to

US \$ 15 billion. The group's interests include the manufacture of synthetic fibres, textiles and petrochemical products, oil and gas exploration, petroleum refining, besides telecommunications and financial services. In 1976-77, the Reliance group had an annual turnover of Rs 70 crore. Fifteen years later, this figure had jumped to Rs 3,000 crore. By the turn of the century, this amount had skyrocketed to Rs 60,000 crore. In a period of 25 years, the value of the Reliance group's assets had jumped from Rs 33 crore to Rs 30,000 crore.

The textile tycoon's meteoric rise was not without its fair share of controversy. In India and in most countries of the world, there exists a close nexus between business and politics. In the days of the licence control *raj* Dhirubhai, more than many of his fellow industrialists, understood and appreciated the importance of 'managing the environment', a euphemism for keeping politicians and bureaucrats happy. He made no secret of the fact that he did not have an ego when it came to paying obeisance before government officials – be they of the rank of secretary to the Government of India or a lowly peon.

**L**ong before Dhirubhai entered the scene, Indian politicians were known to curry favour with businessmen – licences and permits would be farmed out in return for handsome donations during election campaigns. The crucial difference in the business-politics nexus lay in the fact that by the time the Reliance group's fortunes were on the rise, the Indian economy had become much more competitive. Hence, it was insufficient for those in power to merely promote the interests of a particular business group; competitors had to simultaneously be put down. This was precisely what happened to the rivals of the Ambanis.

Who remembers Swan Mills? Or Kapal Mehra of Orkay? Even Nusli Wadia of Bombay Dyeing is a pale shadow of what he would certainly have liked to be. The undivided Goenka family that used to control the *Indian Express* chain of newspapers – which carried on a campaign against the Reliance group in 1986-87 – is currently divided into three factions. Whereas the multi-edition newspaper has not entirely lost its feisty character, it is yet to fulfil its late founder Ramnath Goenka's cherished dream of becoming a market leader in at least one of its many publishing centres.

**A** popular joke starts with a question: Which is the most powerful political party in India? Answer: the Reliance Party of India. Others divide the country's politicians into two groups: a very large 'R-positive' group and a very small 'R-negative' section. It is hardly a secret that Dhirubhai's support base would easily cut across political lines. Very few politicians have had the gumption to oppose the Ambanis, just as the overwhelming majority of journalists in the country preferred not to be critical of the Reliance group. The Indian media, most of the time, has chosen to lap up whatever has been doled out by the group's public relations executives. The bureaucracy too has, by and large, favoured the Ambanis, not merely on account of the fact that many *babus* have got accustomed to receiving expensive hampers on the occasion of *diwali*.

While Dhirubhai did not have too many scruples when it came to currying favour with politicians and bureaucrats, what cannot be denied is the fact that perhaps no businessman in India attracted the kind of adulation he did. He was more than just a legend in his lifetime. He successfully convinced close to four million citi-



zens, most of them belonging to the middle class, to invest their hard-earned savings in Reliance group companies. He was fond of describing Reliance shareholders as 'family members' and the group's annual general meetings acquired the atmosphere of large *melas* attended by hordes.

What cannot also be refuted is the fact that the Reliance group believed in rewarding its shareholders handsomely. Much of the credit for the spread of the so-called 'equity cult' in India in recent years should rightfully go to Dhirubhai, even if the Reliance group was often accused of manipulating share prices. Two group companies that once carried the cumbersome names of Reliance Poly-Ethylene and Reliance Poly-Propylene—popularly called *Ilu* and *Pilu*—went to the extent of blandly stating in the fine print of their public issue prospectus documents that the value of the shares of the companies had been increased though thin and circular trading. On another occasion in January 1998, a functionary of Reliance Petroleum replied to a show-cause notice served on the company by agreeing to shell out a sum of Rs 25 crore to 'buy peace' with the income tax authorities.

**W**hen, after having spent eight years in Aden, Dhirubhai returned to Mumbai, his lifestyle was akin to that of any ordinary lower middle class Indian. In 1958, the year he started his first small trading venture, his family used to reside in a one room apartment at Jaihind Estate in Bhuleshwar. After trading in a range of products, primarily spices and fabrics, for eight years, Dhirubhai achieved the first of the many goals he had set for himself when he became the owner of a small spinning mill at Naroda, near Ahmedabad. He did not look back.

He decided that unlike most Indian businessmen who borrowed

heavily from financial institutions to nurture their entrepreneurial ambitions, he would instead raise money from the public at large to fund his industrial ventures. In 1977, Reliance Industries went public and raised equity capital from tens of thousands of investors, many of them located in small towns. From then onwards, Dhirubhai started extensively promoting his company's textile brand name, Vimal. The story goes that on one particular day, the Reliance group chairman inaugurated the retail outlets of as many as 100 franchises.

**H**e had by then already succeeded in cultivating politicians. Indira Gandhi returned to power in the 1980 general elections and Dhirubhai shared a platform with the then prime minister of India at a victory rally. He had also become very close to the then finance minister Pranab Mukherjee, not to mention the prime minister's principal aide R.K. Dhawan. He realised that it was crucial to be friendly with politicians in power, especially at a time when the group had embarked on an ambitious programme to build an industrial complex at Patalganga to manufacture synthetic fibres and intermediates for polyester production.

In 1982, Dhirubhai created waves in the stock markets when he took on a Kolkata-based cartel of bear operators that had sought to hammer down the share price of Reliance Industries. The cartel badly underestimated the Ambani ability to fight back. Not only did Dhirubhai manage to ensure the purchase of close to a million shares that the bear cartel offloaded, he demand physical delivery of shares. The bear cartel was rattled. In the process, the bourses were thrown into a state of turmoil and the Bombay Stock Exchange had to shut down for a couple of days before the crisis was resolved.

The mid-eighties were a period during which the Reliance group got locked in a bitter turf battle with Bombay Dyeing headed by Nusli Wadia. The two corporate groups were producing competing products – Reliance was manufacturing purified terephthalic acid (PTA) and Bombay Dyeing, di-methyl terephthalate (DMT). Wadia lost the battle and reportedly became the source of information for many of the articles against the Ambanis that subsequently appeared in *The Indian Express*. In 1985, the Mumbai police accused a general manager in a Reliance group company of conspiring to kill Wadia, a charge that was never established in a court of law. Many years later, a newspaper owned by the Ambanis would accuse Wadia of illegally holding two passports and played up the fact that he was Mohammed Ali Jinnah's grandson.

1986 was a crucial year for Dhirubhai. He suffered a stroke in February that year. A few months later, the *Express* began publishing a series of articles attacking the Reliance group as well as the Indira Gandhi regime for favouring the Ambanis. These articles were coauthored by Arun Shourie who, ironically, as Union Minister for Disinvestment in the Atal Behari Vajpayee government, presided over the sale of 26 per cent of the equity capital of the former public sector company, Indian Petrochemicals Corporation Limited (IPCL), to the Reliance group in May this year. By gaining managerial control over IPCL, the Reliance group would now be able to dominate the Indian market for a wide variety of petrochemical products.

**S**hourie's coauthor for the famous series of anti-Reliance articles was Chennai-based chartered accountant S. Gurusamy who happens to be a

leading light of the Swadeshi Jagaran Manch, an outfit that espouses the cause of economic nationalism and is closely affiliated to the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), the ideological parent of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). The *Express* articles written by Shourie and Gurmurthy meticulously detailed a host of ways in which the government of the day had gone out of its way to assist the Ambanis. One article was on the subject of how the Reliance group imported 'spare parts', 'components' and 'balancing equipment' of textile manufacturing machinery to nearly double its production capacities. The article provocatively claimed the Ambanis had 'smuggled' in a plant.

**A**nother story detailed how companies registered in the tax haven, Isle of Man, with ridiculous names like Crocodile Investments, Iota Investments and Fiasco Investments had purchased Reliance shares at one-fifth their market prices. Curiously, most of these firms were controlled by a clutch of nonresident Indians who had the same surname, Shah. Though Pranab Mukherjee had to change a reply he gave in Parliament on the investments made by these firms, an inquiry conducted by the Reserve Bank of India could not find any evidence of wrongdoing. Yet another article detailed how the group had been the beneficiary of a 'loan mela'—a number of banks had loaned funds to more than 50 firms that had all purchased debentures issued by Reliance Industries.

Vishwanath Pratap Singh was one of the few politicians who took on the Ambanis. In May 1985, as finance minister in Rajiv Gandhi's government, he suddenly shifted imports of PTA from the OGL (Open General Licence) category. At that juncture, Reliance needed to import this pro-

duct to manufacture polyester filament yarn. It was found that the group had 'persuaded' a number of banks to open letters of credit that would allow it to import almost one full year's requirement of PTA on the eve of the issuance of the government notification changing the category under which PTA could be imported. It was hardly a coincidence that soon after V.P. Singh fell out with Rajiv Gandhi, various tax agencies of the Indian government raided the premises of the *Express* group.

Things got difficult for the Ambanis after V.P. Singh became prime minister in December 1989. In 1990, government-owned financial institutions like the Life Insurance Corporation and the General Insurance Corporation stonewalled attempts by the Reliance group to acquire managerial control over Larsen and Toubro, one of India's largest construction and engineering companies. Sensing defeat, the Ambanis resigned from the board of the company after incurring large losses. Dhirubhai, who had become L&T chairman in April 1989, had to quit his post to make way for D. N. Ghosh, former chairman of the State Bank of India.

**O**nce again, in an ironical twist of fate, more than eleven years later, the Reliance group suddenly sold its stake in L&T to Grasim Industries headed by Kumaramangalam Birla. This transaction too attracted adverse attention. Questions were raised about how the Reliance group had increased its stake in L&T a short while before the sale to Grasim had taken place. The watchdog of the stock markets, the Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI) instituted an inquiry into the transactions following allegations of price manipulation and insider trading. Reliance had to later cough up a token fine imposed by SEBI.

These are hardly the only controversies involving the Reliance group. Two senior executives of the Reliance group, including one who was known to be close to Dhirubhai, have been accused of violating the Official Secrets Act after a Cabinet note was found in their office during a police raid. One of these executives reportedly had links with a mafia don. Earlier, there had been a major uproar in the stock exchanges over alleged cases of 'switching' of shares and the issue of duplicate shares. Some of these transactions pertained to Dhirubhai's personal physiotherapist.

**M**ore recently, last year, Raashid Alvi, a Member of Parliament belonging to the Bahujan Samaj Party, levelled a large number of allegations against the Reliance group. He distributed a voluminous bunch of photocopied documents to journalists that included the letter in which a Reliance group company had sought to 'buy peace' with the income tax department. The MP accused the Reliance group companies of manipulating their balance sheets and annual statements of account.

A week after Dhirubhai's death, the Department of Company Affairs (DCA) confirmed that there was basis to some of the allegations raised by Alvi and that there were certain discrepancies in the balance sheet issued by Reliance Petroleum seven years ago. A group spokesperson sought to dismiss the discrepancy as a minor printing error that had been inadvertently committed. The DCA subsequently confirmed that different Reliance group companies had transferred interest income to one another in a questionable manner.

The plethora of scandals and controversies surrounding the Reliance group left Dhirubhai's supporters completely unmoved. His supporters—and

there was no dearth of them – would argue that there was no businessman in India whose track record was lily-white. Had the textile tycoon himself not acknowledged once to *Time* magazine that he was no Mother Teresa, they would ask. Even Hamish McDonald's unflattering portrayal of Dhirubhai in his book *The Polyester Prince* – published in Australia by Allen and Unwin and not available in India – acknowledges his remarkable entrepreneurial talent that made him one of the few Indians on the *Forbes* list of the world's wealthy and placed Reliance among the leading 500 companies in the developing world compiled by *Fortune* magazine.

**S**enior journalist T.V.R. Shenoy, in a tribute to Dhirubhai entitled 'A Superman named Ambani' posted on the rediff.com website, points out that the Reliance group accounts for three per cent of India's gross domestic product (GDP), five per cent of the country's exports, 10 per cent of the Indian government's indirect tax revenues (excise and customs duties), 15 per cent of the weight of the sensitive index of the Bombay Stock Exchange and 30 per cent of the total profits of all private companies in the country put together. Another journalist, Manas Chakravarty, concluded his not-so-adulatory article in the *Business Standard* with the following sentence: '...it was (Dhirubhai's) common touch combined with his uncommon vision that was the secret of his success.'

Dhirubhai's supporters like to recall instances of his 'common touch' and his ability to interact with individuals from different walks of life. In 1983, he had hosted a lunch for 12,000 of his company's workers on the occasion of the marriage of his younger daughter Dipti. The departed Reliance group patriarch would often wonder aloud that if he could achieve what he

did in a lifetime, why could a thousand Dhirubhais not flourish. He was sure that there were at least one thousand individuals like him in the country who would dare to dream big. And if all these entrepreneurs could achieve their ambitions, India would become an economic superpower one day, he would remark.

Dhirubhai's managerial skills were undoubtedly exceptional and he would repose his faith in professionals, many of whom had earlier worked in much-maligned public sector organisations. Whether it was the building of the petroleum refinery at Jamnagar in three years at a capital cost that was 30 per cent lower than comparable projects, or the restarting of the Patalganga plant in one month's time after sudden floods had occurred in July 1989, the Reliance management team displayed their competence on many occasions.

**T**he Ambanis often scored because they stuck to their knitting or focused sharply on their areas of 'core competence'. The group flopped when they entered new areas, be these the print medium or financial services. The group's foray into power generation too has so far not yielded significant results. Dhirubhai's sons, Mukesh (45) and Anil (43) are keen on effectively implementing their plans of diversifying into the 'new economy', into new areas like telecommunications, life sciences and insurance. The Reliance group intends proving telecom services in many parts of the country and is currently building an optic fibre based broadband internet network connecting 115 cities. Only time will tell whether Mukesh and Anil prove to be worthy successors to their father. But one thing seems certain: they will try their level best not to be as controversial as Dhirubhai was.

# The clash of generations

ASHOK V. DESAI

THE middle class never starves; it can afford to think beyond immediate necessities. It is, of course, susceptible to the vicissitudes of the economy; but it reacts to economic changes with a lag, and its mood depends to a greater extent on its sense of ease with the society and history. I remember how sombre the mood was in my childhood. World War II was being fought; it was as close as Assam. Prices were rising day by day. There were daily shortages only partly mitigated by rationing; but there was rampant starvation in Bengal, and crops requisitioned for the army rotted. There was no question of growth and expanding opportunities; just carrying on was a struggle.

With such hardships in the recent past, the years that followed, though they brought modest enough gains, were a period of great cheer. This sense of improvement made the socialist experiment, then just started, tolerable. The payments crisis of 1950s was an entirely avoidable result of gross mismanagement. The defeat in the Sino-Indian war of 1962 was the result of the most elementary miscalculation. The crisis of 1965-66 was the direct result of socialist folly. But no one saw it that way. Everyone saw a great improvement in economic growth compared to the arid inter-war years; so everyone was cheerful and forgiving of an incompetent government.

But the travails of the late 1960s left their mark; young people who could not get a meal on Mondays

because Shastri ordered all restaurants closed to save food felt less than enthusiastic about the glories of socialism. But all politicians are prisoners of discredited shibboleths; so was Indira Gandhi. Her cure for failed socialism was more socialism. Banks were nationalized; if we had been slightly unluckier, Kumaramangalam would have nationalized wholesale trade. With that India would have been unbeatable in the corruption stakes. Even without it, it has put in a sterling performance.

And as Indira Gandhi went from strength to strength, the middle class's mood went sour. Rajiv's years saw the best economic growth in India's recorded history; Narasimha Rao's were not far behind. But they did not cheer up the middle class. Its pride had received too many blows: the emergency, the Sikh insurgency, the Bofors scandal, the Shah Bano case. With venom in its heart, it embraced the Bharatiya Janata Party. And the BJP gave it the rewards it longed for – the nuclear ceremony, the Kargil sacrifice, the military standoff with Pakistan, the patriotized school textbooks. At last the government has fulfilled all middle class aspirations. India has never before beaten its chest with such resonance.

It should be a time of celebration, there should be exhilaration in the air. The BJP should be sweeping the floor with the Congress. But it is not happening. Has the middle class turned ungrateful? Is it getting affected by economic miseries?

No; I think its depression is due to a new, unprecedented phenomenon – the revolt of its children. For millennia India has had a snail-paced economy. In any economy where there are few opportunities and where little changes, parents have the upper hand. They possess the land that the young must inherit, the skills that the young must learn, and the rituals that divide the society into castes and classes. For the first time in its history, economic change has accelerated; if it goes on like this, the young will no longer need their parents. Though yet subliminal, that thought has unhinged India's grown-ups. Let me illustrate this from the Gujarati society with which I am familiar.

There was a time, not even three decades ago, when shopkeepers waited eagerly for the festive season, for that is when customers streamed in. The days before Diwali were the time to buy new clothes, new footwear, new jewellery. Today, shopkeepers wait listlessly while customers go off to Mauritius and Malaysia over Diwali.

There was a time, just about three decades ago, when Navratri was a family festival. A Gujarati family that was numerous and prosperous enough might organize a garba; but that was not the centre of the celebrations. The entire season from Navratri to Diwali was a season for visiting and entertaining friends. The mass garbas in Gujarati cities, where thousands mill around and fleetingly meet strangers of the opposite sex, were not only unknown, but their very idea would have shocked middle class Gujaratis.

These bewildering changes are the manifestation of deep, underlying transformations in our economy. Diwali was the season after the kharif harvest; the crop was in, the grain bins were full, and the sale of the harvest

had brought in money; it was this prosperity that brought custom to shopkeepers and cheer to the festivals. The prosperity was celebrated because it was brief; soon the coffers and the granaries would empty, and the people – and even more, their cattle – would have to struggle through the harsh summer when nothing grew. The cycle was familiar in all countries with pronounced seasons, although the seasons of prosperity and hardship were different.

Thus, the major festival in the parts of India which have a winter harvest falls in spring – for instance, Onam in the south and Lohri in Punjab. Europe chose Christmas because that is when the shortage of fodder began to be felt; that was the time to slaughter and feast on cattle that could not be fed through the winter. Now the harvest or the winter cull has lost its significance. Even in India agriculture accounts for just a quarter of the national income; in richer countries its share is down to 3-4 per cent. As a result, old festivals have lost their context; they can continue only if they find a new context.

The mass garbas of today signify the integration of the Gujarati society that would have been unthinkable a quarter of a century ago. Then, parents would have chosen brides for their sons and bridegrooms for their daughters from an extremely dispersed but well-knit caste. Castes emerged locally but spread over vast distances over time; if they were to survive as endogamous groups, a mechanism for collecting and sharing information about their members was necessary. The mechanism consisted of gossip over good food in the festive season.

Today, however, both young men and women work; some men even prefer to marry working women. At work they come in contact with col-

leagues from all over India, colleagues speaking different languages, born in different religions, educated in different schools. If they marry those they encounter, are attracted to, fall in love with, they may well move away from their parents. They may not support their parents in old age; worse, they may distance themselves, and their children may not even recognize their grandparents.

The fear is very real amongst Gujaratis. Gujaratis are naturally peripatetic, and large communities have spread into the white countries. The loss of cohesion and identity are real possibilities for them; thousands of their children marry not just non-Gujaratis, but non-Indians and drift away from their parents. The danger is brought home by the fact that Jains are the only religious group in India whose population has declined. So many Jains are Gujaratis, and culturally they differ so little from other middle class Gujaratis that their children have been marrying non-Jains in hordes.

So Gujaratis have developed institutions to keep together. In garbas, young men and women get together from different castes, but they are all middle class and rather conventional. They are one institutional innovation to keep young people within the fold. And it is not just Gujaratis who try. Agarwals organize vast get-togethers in sports stadiums where parents and children can get acquainted with fellow caste-members – with children's engagement in mind. Others have not found the solution, but still face the problem.

For instance, so many Namboodri Brahmins of Kerala have gone abroad, and their children have married non-Namboodris. At the same time, the community is so prosperous that no one wants to become a priest

and spend his time repeating the same prayers over and over again in a temple. So it has relaxed the rules and allowed children of Namboodri and non-Namboodri mixed marriages to become priests – although it does not recognize them as proper Namboodris.

**T**he resurgence of religion in recent years owes itself to the same forces. In the 1960s and 1970s, many Sikh boys were shaving off beards and marrying non-Sikh girls; and non-Sikh boys found Sikh girls particularly attractive. The revolt of parents against the perfidy of their children was behind the Sikh extremism of the 1980s. It was most virulent where the danger of youth secession was the greatest – amongst the small, prosperous Sikh communities that were so conspicuous in the homogenous societies of North America and Britain.

For them, Khalistan was to be a dreamland where their children would be protected from the wiles of attractive non-Sikh youth. Similarly, the exhibitionist religiosity of the Sangh family is above all a device for keeping children from straying away and – horror of horrors – marrying Christians and Muslims. The fact that the latter so often marry non-religionists only makes matters worse.

The same forces act somewhat differently amongst Muslims. They have suffered a catastrophic decline of their upper class. First the British decimated the Muslim nobility of the Mughal court. Then, at the time of independence, the better-off Muslims – the remnants of nobility, the zamindars of Punjab and UP, rich Khojas of Bombay and Gujarat – emigrated to Pakistan. Those that stayed were predominantly poor labourers and craftsmen; and the latter have suffered from the mechanization of the last 50 years.

Second, westernization under the British was confined to the rich

amongst the Muslims; and after they migrated to Pakistan, the rest remained distinctly less westernized and hence less capable of exploiting the benefits of industrialization and growth of government. And finally, after independence there was discrimination in employment.

It was not overall or systematic; it was more in the private sector than in government, and more in some states than in others. But as a result, the economic ladders for rising have been less available to Muslims than to others. If, today, Muslims are more conspicuous by their beards and caps, if they have changed over less to trousers and spindly moustaches, it is because they have remained more Indian; and they are more indigenous because they have been left behind by the tide of westernization.

**B**ut exclusion and backwardness have their own social consequences. Unemployment makes children more dependent till later in life on their parents, and increases the latter's control. The society of the poor is a harsher and crueler one; paranoia and distrust come more naturally to the poor. Charity and dependence play a greater role amongst the poor; and after the 1970s, the sudden wealth of the Arab countries meant that the charity often came from abroad. In these ways, Muslims – especially North Indian Muslims – have been marginalized in Indian society, and have acquired the attitudes of marginal minorities all over the world.

Paranoid Hindus tend to suspect treason and terrorism amongst the Muslims. There is precious little of either; however, what is there is a sullen sense of grievance. Attitudes will find an articulation; their logic is immaterial. Just as paranoid Hindus get themselves in a sweat over a temple destroyed 470 years ago, paranoid

Muslims suspect universal discrimination and injustice.

The Muslims' problem is made worse by the fact that economic failure feeds the forces of inwardness, and the entire Muslim world has failed economically in the past 20 years. If the economy does not grow fast enough to give the population growing employment and income, it will accumulate pools of idle people whose stress will take collective forms. This is why internationalist, extremist movements have taken root even in Egypt whose government is entirely hostile to them and in Saudi Arabia which in other ways is a very conservative society.

**T**his is why Pakistan proved such a willing ally in the dirty, labour intensive war in Afghanistan, and why it finds it so difficult to suppress violent sectarian movements at home, let alone stop their export to India. Indians have fundamentally and systematically misunderstood Musharraf: he is not intent on exporting terrorists to India. He finds it too much hard work to stop their export, since doing so would put him at odds with the terrorist agencies in Pakistan; he asks what would he get if he stopped them. India's answer is, nothing; it wants an end to terrorism without paying any price for it. And you cannot get something for nothing.

However, it is not only in the Muslim world that economic failure has caused social disruption in various ways. It has done so far more spectacularly in Africa, where entire nations like Congo have collapsed in endemic civil wars. It has led respectable middle-class housewives to march, beating a cacophony on frying pans, to the palace of Argentina's president. The half century that has passed since World War II is seen as a period of peace and growing prosperity. But there is little

prosperity in most of the developing world, there is even less peace in parts of it. What there is a lot of is leisure; there are millions of able-bodied people with little to do in poor countries.

Liberals divert attention from this fact by pointing to East Asia, and paradoxically, China; these are exhibited as examples of the prosperity that open economies can experience. These economies are open only in the sense that their commodity exports rose very rapidly. They all had varieties of protectionist policies, at least to start with. Then, as they earned more foreign exchange than they knew what to do with, they opened up to imports, but each in its own way; there was no systematic bias in favour of free trade and low import barriers.

But what was common to them all was that they latched on to a handful of large industrial country markets – principally the US, but also Japan, and to a lesser extent, Europe – finding markets in these countries and building up huge exports. Now that China is emerging as a big trader, they are latching on to it.

**T**he entire developing world cannot follow in their footsteps; industrial countries' markets are not large enough, and many of them are difficult to enter. But India could have, and still can; its location, its large skilled labour force, and its managerial and technological capacity, still make it possible. The biggest hurdle to India's emergence as a major exporter has been its import barriers: if it protects an industry with a tariff of 40 per cent, that industry can never become a significant exporter.

East Asian countries managed to combine protection with exports by insulating exporting industries from the high levels of protection. India has imitated them with its duty drawbacks and import replenishments. But its

bureaucracy is too corrupt to let these arrangements function; that is why India needs a regime of low, ideally no, duties. The fear that duty reduction will kill domestic industries is misconceived.

**A**t least till India begins to attract large amounts of capital, its imports will be limited by its exports; for every rupee of imports that competes with local industry there must be a rupee of exports that creates a market abroad for it. The exporting industry may – will generally – be different from the import-competing industry; to that extent more trade will expand some industries and shrink others. Thus there may be rapid, sometimes painful structural change; but on balance, trade can make India only richer, as it did East Asia.

But foreign trade alone cannot make India rich. It did not East Asian countries; and India, being larger, will get even less stimulus from trade. Ultimately, a country can get richer only by producing more value per worker. Trade helps by changing the relative prices, and by raising production of those goods which find markets abroad at prices higher than at home. But a more powerful force for increasing labour productivity is change in production methods. And producers change their methods if competition forces them.

We in India think of reforms in terms of regulation and privatization, but we seldom think of increasing competition and making it more effective. We think of trifurcating state electricity boards and appointing state electricity regulatory commissions. But we never think of de-merging the state electricity boards and making each power plant a separate, competing company. We never think of making a one-line law, that anyone can sell electricity to anyone else. When the

US decided to abolish the telephone monopoly of Bell, it de-merged a large number of Baby Bells out of Bell, and prohibited Bell from competing with them until they had achieved a certain size and strength.

We began to subsidize farmers when we were short of food; we have multiplied the subsidies manifold and continued them into a time when we are producing more food than we know what to do with. We have raised foodgrain prices so much that we cannot even export them without a loss. And a farmer can earn the subsidy only by selling to a government monopoly. If he must be subsidized, why not give him a lump-sum subsidy, let him do what he likes with it, let him sell whatever he finds profitable and sell it to whomever would pay him the best price?

**T**hese and other policies for improving India's growth and competitiveness are possible and practicable. And if we follow them, there will be more jobs. Young people will find their feet faster, they will be thrown together in their workplaces, they will grow out of the religions and customs into which they have been indoctrinated by their parents, and they will develop a pan-Indian culture. But if we continue with our measly growth, they will hang around the homes and cadge pocket money from their mothers; they will be slaves of their parents' parochialism.

If we want a model of what happens to countries that fail economically, we only have to look at the Middle East. Pakistan, Israel, Palestine – they are our future if we fail to make India grow. And it will not matter if it is a devoutly Hindu Palestine – the misery of the people will be the same however much they pray, in whichever language and to whichever God.

# December 13

NANDITA HAKSAR and  
K. SANJAY SINGH

'Whoever is against it, the machine teaches, is an enemy of the nation. Whoever denounces injustice commits treason against the country. I am the country, says the machine. This concentration camp is the country: this garbage heap, this immense wasteland empty of men. Whoever thinks that the country is a house which belongs to everyone shall be the child of no one.'

Eduardo Galeano,  
*Days and Nights of Love and War.*

DECEMBER used to be associated with Christmas – a season for joy and festivity. This year it has only brought a growing sense of sadness, fear and foreboding. The first week of December brings back memories of burnt hair lying in the smouldering homes of Sikhs, and the smell of gas choking thousands to death, and the fear of all consuming hate as a mosque is destroyed. The second week of December has now got inextricably linked to

the ongoing war against terrorism in which the first serious casualties have been civil liberties and human rights. December has become the cruellest month breeding memories of injustice, pain and the dying of a nation's history of resistance to oppression.

On 13 December, 2001 the Indian Parliament was attacked. It is now more than a year and we still do not know the identity of the men who attacked it. The media had reported that six men attacked the Parliament but only five bodies were found. What happened to the sixth? Who were those five men whose bullet-ridden bodies we saw on our TV screens? We have been told their names are: Mohammad, Haider, Hamza, Raja and Rana. The Home Minister, Lal Krishna Advani had declared that the five men looked like Pakistanis.



Does Advani look like a Pakistani? Musharraf like an Indian? We need Toba Tek Singh to decide.

Intelligence agencies claimed that the attack was masterminded by the Commander of Jaish-e-Mohammad, Ghazi Baba, the man behind the hijacking of the Indian Airlines plane to Kandahar in December 1999. They claimed also that the five dead terrorists were involved in the actual hijacking but passengers on that unfortunate flight said that the five did not resemble the hijackers. Passengers phoned *The Indian Express* and the daily carried their statement on the front page.

**W**e do know the names of those security personnel who died fighting the terrorist attack. Members of Parliament were shown paying homage to those who fell saving their lives. But the gesture seemed to lack real emotion when we saw pictures of Prem Yadav, the widow of Jagdish Prasad Yadav who died on December 13. He was posthumously given an Ashok Chakra and Prem was promised money to build a statue in his memory. Sitting on the mud floor of her house in Rajasthan she weeps silently as she tells her little son to recite a patriotic song. He is too young to understand the significance of martyrdom.

Outside their house, Prem has managed to construct a pedestal but she is still waiting for the promised money.

Likewise the family of Kamlesh Kumari, the CRPF jawan who died on December 13, is waiting for the government to fulfil the promises it had made. The family is too poor to build a memorial in Kamlesh's honour.

In another part of the country another family also awaits justice. That is the family of Abdur Rehman Geelani, one of the accused in the Parliament attack case. From the first day of his arrest Geelani has maintained that he has been falsely implicated. In

fact, he claims to have been framed. His family and his friends believe in him. Anyone who knows Abdur Rehman cannot believe that this shy, soft-spoken Kashmiri could have had anything remotely to do with terrorism because he so passionately believes in secular values.

Abdur Rehman Geelani came to Delhi in the mid-nineties and stayed at the postgraduate Mansarovar Hostel of Delhi University. Later he got a job as a lecturer at the Zakir Hussain College where he teaches Arabic and is also registered for his PhD.

Abdur Rehman's friends know him as a deeply compassionate man with a deep love of the fine arts. He is passionately in love with the great secular poets such as Faiz Ahmad Faiz, Moinuddin Maqsum and Majaz. He could spend hours discussing the finer points of Urdu poetry and interpreting the earthly humanity of their message.

Abdur Rehman is a very sensitive soul who feels the pain of others, whether the sufferings of the Kashmiri people or the quake victims of Latur. His compassion was never bound by sectarian concerns. He abhors religious and sectarian fanaticism. Many of the teachers and students of Delhi University got to know him because he unfailingly joined secular rallies and meetings to express his solidarity with causes and struggles for equality and justice.

Now Abdur Rehman stands accused for perpetuating terrorism... knowing him, as we do, it is impossible to believe the charges.

**O**n 14 December 2001 Abdur Rehman set out from his home in Mukherjee Nagar to go for Friday prayers. It was the holy month of Ramzan and he assured his wife, Arifa that he would be back in time for iftar. He did not return.

Instead of her husband returning home, five or six policemen burst into their home, turned it upside down and dragged Arifa and the two small children into a standing car. It was the beginning of a nightmare from which they have still to wake up.

Arifa and the two children saw Abdur Rehman that night. He could not stand up on his own and his wrists and feet had tell-tale marks on them. He had been tortured. The police had tried to break him into confessing a crime he never committed. And now they had brought his wife and children before him to weaken his will, threatening to kill all of them if he did not confess.

Arifa saw the police make Abdur Rehman sign blank-sheets of paper, but he refused to confess to something he neither did nor approve of. Arifa and her children were allowed to go home. But the children will forever carry the memory of that scene. Their childhood abruptly ended that night and they entered a world where fear, suspicion and prejudice reign.

**T**he policemen of the Special Branch will in all probability go scot free even though section 330 of the Indian Penal Code makes it a crime for a policeman to 'voluntarily cause hurt to extort confession' and makes it punishable with imprisonment up to seven years.

It would not have done Geelani any good to tell the policemen that they had violated the provisions of the UN Convention Against Torture, and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment. They would have laughed in his face.

It was just as well given the 'unsavoury' record of the man in charge of the Special Branch, ACP Rajbir Singh. A report in the *Asian Age* of 9 November 2002 said that the policeman had been involved in six 'encoun-

ter' deaths in 2000 and each one had raised more questions than it had answered.

Police records state that Geelani was arrested from his home on 15 December 2001. They cannot explain how his mobile phone had suddenly gone silent from the afternoon of 14 December.

Since then Abdur Rehman has been lodged in Tihar Jail.

**O**n 19 December the police imposed POTA on Abdur Rehman Geelani. It seemed to have been imposed as an afterthought so that he would be unable to move for bail. Those arrested under POTA are denied this basic right, undermining the right to the presumption of innocence till proven guilty.

Eminent citizens, human rights activists and Delhi University teachers wrote letters to the editor protesting against the imposition of POTA on Geelani because it is even more difficult for an innocent man to defend himself under the anti-terrorist law than under the ordinary criminal procedure.

The strangest part of the case was that the police did not first charge the four people arrested and accused of conspiring to attack the prime institution of democracy under POTA, in what is a textbook case of terrorism. This was indeed an inexplicable fact, a key element of the many questions that have arisen with regard to the investigation of this case.

Perhaps the police had decided to rely more on whipping up communal hatred and prejudice than on their own investigative skills. They planted false and defamatory stories against Geelani from the day of his official arrest. Respectable dailies carried these stories making wild, totally unsubstantiated allegations against a man who was in no position to defend

himself. All journalistic ethics were thrown to the wind.

All these stories were ostensibly based on a confession Geelani had made to the police. But the court records of December 21 clearly show that Abdur Rehman had refused to make a false confession. The court records sound more like an accusation than an appreciation of a man's courage in refusing to give into immense pressure.

The first lawyer to reach Abdur Rehman Geelani in Tihar Jail was N.D. Pancholi. For Geelani the visit brought some succour and comfort and Pancholi came back convinced that his client was innocent.

Geelani had been denied access to books and other basic amenities and also the elementary safeguards under POTA. Though Pancholi brought these facts to the notice of the court, the court paid no heed.

**T**he chargesheet was filed in May 2002 well after the mandatory 90 days under ordinary criminal law but within the 180 days allowed under POTA.

The chargesheet stated that Geelani was the only one of the accused who 'had a mobile phone which was found to be a regular mobile card of Airtel, which stood in the name of Syed Abdur Rehman Geelani.' The chargesheet went on to state that the 'subscriber was also found to have made the payments to the mobile company through his SBI card, which also had the same address as revealed from the report received from the SBI.'

The chargesheet stated that Geelani had received a call on his mobile phone on December 14 from Kashmir and 'while talking in Kashmiri language, supported the attack on Parliament. The transcription was translated in Hindi.'

The other charge against Geelani was that he had been in touch with the

other two persons who had been arrested, Mohammad Afzal and Shaukat Guru.

Four persons were arrested: Mohammad Afzal, Shaukat Guru and his wife Navjot, and Abdur Rehman Geelani (in the police and court records Abdur had become Abdul). But eight others were also accused: the five militants who had been killed outside the Parliament and three Pakistanis who had masterminded the attack. Even after the trial was over the links between all these people and their identities remain a mystery.

**A**s far as Geelani is concerned there was not even an allegation that he had any contact with the five dead militants or with the Pakistani masterminds.

On the basis of the evidence of a phone call Geelani was charged under various sections of the Indian Penal Code, including murder, waging war against the Government of India and causing grievous hurt to a public servant on duty; also under the Indian Explosives Act and under POTA.

No arms, ammunition or incriminating pamphlets were ever recovered from Geelani. The prosecution did not produce a single witness who even alleged that Geelani belonged to any illegal organization. But the charge of conspiracy meant that he would face a joint trial and the entire evidence would be treated as evidence against everyone.

The charges were framed and the date was fixed for the trial. It was to be on a day to day basis. How could Geelani be expected to prepare his defence without any time and from behind bars?

It was on 13 June 2002 that we met Abdur Rehman in Tihar Jail. We, along with Arifa and Geelani's younger brother, registered ourselves at eight thirty in the morning. We

would have to wait till noon before we could meet him for barely 15 minutes.

By the time our turn came the crowd had thinned and a policeman barked at Arifa: '*Kis semilnahai?*' And she replied: 'High risk.' She found us looking at her and she apologetically explained: '*Aadat par gayi hai*' (I have got into the habit).

Arifa had got used to many things. Thrown out of their rented house, she could not find anyone who would rent to the family of someone accused of attacking the Parliament. Twice a week she travelled more than four hours by auto and bus, from her residence and back to meet her husband for 15 minutes, after a wait for several hours. She could hand over a shirt or some money. It was not possible to converse across the chasm that separates the prisoner and his visitors.

**A**rifa could not secure admission for her children and ultimately sent her daughter back to Kashmir. Her father had to leave her ailing mother to support his daughter and visit his son-in-law in jail.

We met Geelani. He was furious with us. The trial was to begin and we had not yet discussed how he would conduct his defence. We all agreed that he needed to engage his own lawyers and separate his case from the others. He was not a co-conspirator, or an approver seeking a lighter sentence. He was an innocent man being framed and sought to be destroyed.

It was his anger that was so moving. It reflected his trust in our shared values and in friendships which grow stronger and deeper in times of distress.

We contacted many lawyers. They refused. They did not want to be associated with the Parliament attack case. But what about defending the right to a fair trial? A right enshrined in our Constitution after years of struggle against colonial rule. A right fought

for in the dark days of the Emergency. Can we ever hope to win the war against terrorism by supporting a concept of national security in which human rights have no place?

Finally, we decided to engage a professional criminal lawyer and somehow raise the money for the fees. Sima Gulati agreed to do the case and put aside her other engagements. She put her heart and soul into the case as she realized that her client was innocent and that the police was trying to frame him. Vrinda Grover assisted Sima Gulati and soon they found that the case had taken over their lives.

We started raising money from the teaching community. Not an easy task but this way of mobilizing resources helped to build a small movement around the issue of right to fair trial. It was a movement based on solidarity, not charity.

On 8 July 2002 the trial of Abdur Rehman Geelani and three others began in the Special Sessions Court of S.N. Dhingra at Patiala House, New Delhi. It was to be the first major trial under the Prevention of Terrorism Act.

**A**mnesty International issued an 'Open Letter to the Law Minister' on the occasion of the trial. The letter expressed Amnesty's concerns, which included the virtual impossibility of ensuring a fair trial under POTA. The letter stated: 'Amnesty International believes that POTA in several of its provisions violates international standards for fair trial and is particularly concerned that even the minimal safeguards contained in POTA have not been implemented in the case of Abdur Rehman Geelani.'

Amnesty went on to state that 'there is little apparent evidence to link Abdur Rehman Geelani to the offence; the chargesheet merely states that his phone number was found on the mobile phone of the main accused

and that in a telephone conversation recorded on 14 December 2001, Abdur Rehman Geelani was heard to comment positively on the attack on the Indian Parliament. These are not recognizable criminal offences under Indian law. One of the other accused, Mohammad Afsal, stated at a press conference that Abdur Rehman Geelani had not been involved in the offences. Human rights activists in India have publicly expressed their concern that the available evidence does not warrant the serious criminal charges brought against Geelani and a trial under anti-terrorist legislation.'

Amnesty also pointed out that 'media coverage of the arrests and concerning the person of Abdur Rehman Geelani during the pre-trial period has been extremely prejudicial to his case and the Government of India has not taken any steps to halt this.'

**T**here was palpable hostility both inside the court and in the media. The judge disallowed questions during cross-examination and permitted the police to bring Geelani in handcuffs to court in violation of Supreme Court judgments.

Prashant Bhushan, a Supreme Court advocate with a deep commitment to human rights, challenged the Sessions Court order in the High Court. It took the High Court more than three months to uphold Geelani's right not to be handcuffed in court. The High Court order dated 22 November 2002 stated that the Sessions Court order was patently illegal and improper.

Geelani's lawyers had to fight hard even to obtain a copy of the audiotape of the intercepted conversation. After all, that was, according to the prosecution, the main evidence against Abdur Rehman. The police handed over the tape but without a transcript or translation. And it was not played in the court by the prosecu-

tion despite repeated requests from Geelani's lawyers.

The first question of law to be raised by Geelani's lawyers was whether the intercepted conversation could at all be admitted as evidence, since the police had not followed the procedure laid down under Part V of POTA for interceptions. The Supreme Court had in many cases held that the non-granting of proper sanction was fatal to the prosecution of the accused. The highest court of the land has held that the grant of sanction was not 'an idle formality or acrimonious exercise but a solemn and sacrosanct act,' which provided basic protection to the accused. In this case the prosecution had not even bothered to cite as witnesses those officials who were supposed to have given sanction to intercept Geelani's phone.

The Sessions Court held that although the police had not followed the procedures laid down under POTA, the evidence was admissible because of the serious nature of the crime. Apparently forgotten was a basic principle of natural justice: the more heinous the crime, the higher the proof that is required.

**T**he prosecution produced a witness, Rashid, who said that he had translated the intercepted conversation for the Special Branch after hearing the tape two to four times. Rashid, who had barely passed class six and did not know Hindi well, told the court that the conversation did not include any English words.

According to Rashid, Geelani told his younger brother, while referring to the attack on Parliament, that the attack was necessary. And Geelani then laughed. Rashid stated that Geelani said 'Yeh zaroori hota hai.'

The prosecution also produced witnesses to prove that Geelani knew the other two co-accused, Mohammad

Afzal and Shaukat Guru, a fact that Geelani never denied. He explained to the court while giving his statement under section 313 of the CrPC that since all of them hailed from Baramulla district and lived in Mukherjee Nagar they knew each other. A casual acquaintance could not imply a shared politics.

Geelani admitted having a conversation with his brother on 14 December, before he was picked up by the Special Branch. However, the conversation did not even refer to the attack. His brother had called to ask for a copy of the syllabus and prospectus to be sent to Kashmir. The conversation took place while he was in a bus and Abdur Rehman repeatedly told his brother not to waste money by phoning during the day when the rates are high.

Geelani requested the judge to hear the tape for himself so that he could hear the words 'prospectus and syllabus'. The judge refused his request.

Under the law laid down, the courts have held in many cases that the statement of the accused must be treated like any other piece of evidence, and matters in favour of the accused must be viewed with as much deference and given as much weight as matters which tell against him. This is a principle based on the premise that an accused is presumed innocent till proven guilty.

**T**he media continued to be largely hostile or indifferent. And public opinion is largely shaped by the media. If Geelani was to even hope to get a fair hearing we had to change public perception by raising the demand for a fair trial and linking it to the question of protection of human rights even in the middle of the war against terrorism.

Thus was born the idea of setting up the All India Defence Committee for Syed Abdur Rehman Geelani, with Professor Rajni Kothari as the Chair-

man. On 29 August the committee held a press conference to announce itself. The conference opened with Surendra Mohan reading out a moving letter written in Urdu by Geelani from jail for the occasion. Abdur Rehman expressed his gratitude to the committee members and said he realised that our decision to stand for justice was like walking barefoot on red-hot embers. He said that our efforts were not only to save an individual but would go towards restoring democracy and justice.

The committee members are: Rajni Kothari, Surendra Mohan, Aruna Roy, Babu Mathew, Prabhash Joshi, Syeda Hammed, Arundhati Roy, Sandeep Pandey, Sanjay Kak, Y.P. Chhibber, Nandita Hakshar and Kumar Sanjay Singh.

**O**n that day the committee focused attention of the press on the brutal attack on Geelani a few days earlier by a co-prisoner who had tried to slash him with a blade. Geelani had filed a complaint in the Sessions Court and the prison authorities had denied his charges. But in court he informed us that the prison authorities had told him that they could not provide for his safety. He had been saved by his fellow prisoners but what would happen if he were not so lucky the next time? The Defence Committee filed a complaint before the National Human Rights Commission. That seemed to have had a salutary effect.

The most difficult question facing us was why we had formed a committee asking for a fair trial only for Geelani. Did we not want a fair trial for the other three? We were clear that we did not in any way harm the interests of the other three accused, one of whom was a woman with a baby born in the jail.

The reason why we thought that Geelani's case merited separation was

because he was the one singled out by the police and media. He was the prime target of the hostility, possibly because Abdur Rehman represents that section of opinion in Kashmir which makes it difficult for the government to stereotype him as a fundamentalist or a jihadi. He hails from an economically poor family but one which is deeply respected for its role in spreading education. It seemed that Abdur Rehman's crime is that he is an educated, secular Muslim.

Arundhati Roy put it succinctly in her solidarity message: 'I fully support the enterprise of ensuring that Syed Abdur Rehman Geelani gets a free and fair trial. If he doesn't, it would undermine the meaning of democracy.'

Meanwhile the teachers of Delhi University and Jawaharlal Nehru University had, in a unique gesture of solidarity with their imprisoned colleague, written an open letter to the Chief Justice enumerating the safeguards denied to Geelani and the other co-accused during both the pre-trial and trial stage. They reminded the Chief Justice that once before four senior law professors had written to the then Chief Justice regarding the injustice done by the Supreme Court to a young tribal girl raped by policemen while she was in their custody. The injustice had been largely due to social prejudices against women, especially tribal women.

**T**he Defence Committee contacted many people in an effort to get someone with impeccable credentials and a reputation for personal integrity to transcribe the cassette and translate the intercepted conversation. Our efforts were rewarded when the veteran trade union leader from Srinagar, Sampat Prakash, agreed to testify in the court. He, unlike many of his fellow Kashmiri Pandits, had decided to stay

in the valley and fight for the rights of his people. His immediate response to our request sent through Balraj Puri in Jammu was that he considered it his duty to depose in court.

Sampat Prakash himself had spent eight years in jail and had challenged the provisions of a state preventive detention law under which he had suffered 17 months in solitary confinement. The case was an important precedent often cited by human rights lawyers. The second witness who agreed to transcribe and translate the intercepted telephone conversation for the court was the Delhi-based filmmaker, Sanjay Kak who has won acclaim both in India and abroad for his documentary films.

**T**he absolute sincerity and integrity of the two Kashmiris must have got through and the judge finally allowed the tape to be played in the court on 9 November 2002. It was exactly four months after the start of the trial that the public heard the evidence against Abdur Rehman. It was clear that the police had falsified evidence and that their witness had lied to the court.

Sampat Prakash and Sanjay Kak told the court that there were English words such as syllabus and prospectus in the conversation and the judge could hear them for himself. The words, '*Yeh zaroori hota hai*' were not uttered anywhere in the conversation and there was nothing to link Geelani with the attack on the Parliament in the two and half minute conversation between the brothers. Both witnesses told the court that they had heard the tape 10 to 12 times very carefully before transcribing it.

Geelani's younger brother also deposed in court that he had phoned to press Abdur Rehman to send him the syllabus and prospectus and his older brother had told him several times to put down the phone because

it was expensive to call in the morning. The 18 year old stood in the witness box looking at his older brother in handcuffs feeling somewhat guilty of having landed him in jail by his phone call. No one blamed him. Not even the police who had admitted during cross-examination that they had found nothing against him.

**B**y 31 October the High Court gave its long awaited order on the question of admissibility of the intercepted telephone conversation under POTA. In its 74-page order the High Court held: 'It is true that the allegations against the petitioners are of a very grave and serious nature. But while considering the aspect of fair trial, the nature of evidence obtained and the nature of safeguards violated are both relevant factors.' The court held that the safeguards under POTA had been ignored and thus the intercepted conversation was inadmissible under the law.

It was this judgment which exposed the fact that the police had done really shoddy investigation in a case that should have merited their best possible efforts. But the question raised again and again was whether the judgment was only about procedure or about substantive law. The point missed was that when law enforcement agencies begin to violate the letter and spirit of the law and justify these violations in the name of national security they acquire impunity. Such an impunity is the beginning of the end of rule of law and of basic human rights.

Senior media persons have asked whether violation of procedures is merely nit-picking and lawyer talk. Perhaps they did not pay sufficient attention to the testimony of one very courageous journalist who came to court as a defence witness for Geelani.

Shams Tahir Khan, principal correspondent of Aaj Tak, was one of the many journalists who had been

called by ACP Rajbir Singh to the Special Branch office on 21 December 2001 to record the statement of Mohamad Afzal. Other TV channels such as NDTV and Zee were also present. Afzal confessed to being a part of the conspiracy to attack the Parliament but he also clearly stated that Geelani had nothing to do with it.

Rajbir Singh shouted at Afzal and told him not to say anything about Geelani; he also told the media not to report this part of the statement. That is why the media did not broadcast that part of Afzal's statement. However, a hundred days after the attack on Parliament it was only Aaj Tak which broadcast that part of the statement. That is how we learnt about it and requested Aaj Tak to allow Shams Tahir Khan to show the tape to the court.

Afzal told the court that he had indeed stated that Geelani was not involved in the conspiracy. Afzal has a sense of honour which would not allow him to falsely incriminate a man. But what happened to those institutions on which we depend to uphold our constitutionally guaranteed freedoms and fundamental rights?

**T**he next day Manoj Pande of the *Times of India* also testified in court as Geelani's defence witness. He confirmed what Shams Tahir Khan had stated; that Afzal had indeed said that Geelani was not involved.

Zee TV made a film in 16 days on the occasion of the first anniversary of the attack on Parliament. It claimed it was not just a film but the reality. Apart from the fact that it was badly made, the film does not quote any source other than the police, as if the police version is the god given truth. In violation of all journalistic ethics and human rights standards, the film was screened. A triumph of the war against terrorism!

The High Court did grant a stay on its showing, but the Supreme Court protected Zee TV's right to freedom of expression and vacated the stay. The judge observed that the Sessions Court judge would not be influenced by the film. They missed the point.

The question is not whether the Sessions Court judge would be influenced by a film based on the police version, three days before he was to read out his judgment on the Parliament attack case. The point is that such films influence the public at large. They do not enlighten people on the causes of terrorism; rather they only serve to strengthen the forces of hatred, prejudice and fear.

**T**he people in Kashmir have been very closely following the trial. They have been regularly logging on to the website launched by the All India Defence Committee. Many organizations have been surprised that we have politely refused help, monetary or otherwise, from all political parties. They are astonished that we have been able to raise money by going to the people in Delhi, mostly the teaching community and these donations have come as expression of solidarity with an innocent man being framed.

In Kashmir the trial is viewed as a political trial, a fact pointed out by K.G. Kannabiran, senior counsel, who represented Shaukat Guru. Kannabiran, a lawyer with more than four decades of experience in fighting life and death battles in courts, told the Sessions Judge that the police were under pressure to enact 'a grand trial of a grand conspiracy... but the courts should not countenance the reduction of criminal prosecution into a third-grade circus to cater to an orchestrated clamour for instant retribution.'

Kannabiran warned the court that 'in the charge of conspiracy the

court has to guard itself against the danger of unfairness to the accused. Introduction of evidence against some may result in conviction of all, which is to be avoided.'

**O**n 16 December 2002, the POTA court delivered its judgement holding all four accused guilty, the first three accused of being part of a conspiracy to wage war against the state and thus liable to the maximum sentence and the fourth, Afsan Guru, for being in the knowledge of the conspiracy but not informing the authorities about it. Two days later, on 18 December, it awarded death penalty to the first three accused, including Geelani.

Surprisingly, or not so, the court refused to pay heed to the alternative translation of the transcript of the telephone conversation between Abdur Rehman Geelani and his brother. This despite the fact that it is the single point on which the judge has decided that Geelani is guilty and deserves capital punishment. Most amazingly, the learned judge chose to believe the prosecution witness because 'language is not the monopoly of the educated and elite class... Tulsidas, Kabir and several other contemporary personalities had little formal education but had command over language.' Our case rests. [Transcript at end of article]

There is a distinct possibility of the case going up to the Supreme Court. The road to legal justice is a long, long one. The road to real justice is even longer. Abdur Rehman's two children have been watching this trial. They know that their father is innocent and are waiting for him to come home. But will they ever have the same faith in Indian justice or Indian democracy? What will they think of the school teacher who preaches that human rights are enshrined in our Constitution to protect Indian citizens from the abuse of state power?

### Translation of the Phone Conversation in Kashmiri

	<i>Kashmiri Conversation</i>	<i>English Translation</i>	<i>Hindustani Language</i>
1. Receiver	Hello	Hello	Hello
2. Caller	Hello, Assalammalaikum Jenab	Hello, Assalammalaikum Sir	Hello, Assalammalaikum Jenab
3. Receiver	Valaikum Salam	Valaikum Salaam	Valikum Salaam
4. Caller	Vaaray?	Are you well?	Kya aap theek hain?
5. Receiver	Theek paaeth, khosh, khosh!	Very well, quite happy!	Theek tarah se hoon! Khoush hoon
6. Caller	_____	_____	_____
7. Caller	Jaan paaeth	Quite fine	Bahut ache
8. Receiver	Na apuz kyazi vanay	No, why should I tell lies	Nahin, mein jooth kuon bolum
9. Caller	Che kati chukh? Gare pathae?	Where are you? Calling from home?	Tum kahan ho? Ghar se bole rahe ho?
10. Receiver	Na, Na. Ba chhus na gare paethac	No, No. I am not speaking from home	Nahin, Nahin. Mein ghar se nahin bole raha hoon
11. Caller	Kya?	What?	Kya?
12. Receiver	_____	_____	_____
13. Receiver	Ba chhus gaadi manz	I am in the bus	Mein gaadi mein hoon
14. Caller	Bassi manz?	In the bus?	Kya bus mein?
15. Receiver	Tim chhe neran waale. Ba chhus garah pakaan. Tse van che kyah gachhi?	They are about to leave. I am heading Towards home. What do you want?	Who nikalne waale hein. Mein ghar ja raha hoon. Tumhein kya chahiye?
16. Caller	Syllabus te prospectus	Syllabus and prospectus	Syllabus aur prospectus
17. Receiver	Myani khayala che trav vunkes phone Vunkes nare na kaaem Timan chhu yyuni narun Khan Saa'bas	I deem it advisable for you to drop the phone at this moment. Your job can't be done this time. They have to leave just now. Khan Sahib	Tumhara isi waqt mere khyal mein, phone rakhna theek rahega. Tumhara kaam is waqt nahin ho sakta. Unko abhi jaana hai. Khan Sahib
18. Caller	Kaman?	Whom?	Kin ko?
19.	_____	_____	_____
20. Receiver	Khan Saa'baas hassa. Ba karay cheer phone. Az ya pagah. Ya doyi teryi dohai. Ya Eed peth. Yunkes Khasan ponsa ziyada	It is Khan Sahib. I will ring you up late at night. Today or tomorrow or on the Eed festival. It will cost higher at this time	Khan Sahib hain. Mein der se phone karunga. Aaj ya kal. Ya do ya teen din ke baad. Ya Eed per. Is samay paisa zyada lagega
21. Caller	Accha, Accha, Janeb, Janeb	Yes, Yes, Sir, Sir	Haan, Haan, Janab, Janab
22. Caller	Bae Soruy Theekh?	Rest all well?	Bilkul theek?
23. Receiver	Janeb	Sir	Janab
24. Caller	Ye kyah korva?	What has happened?	Yeh kya hua?
25. Receiver	Kya? Dilli-Ha?	What, in Delhi?	Kya Dilli mein?
26. Caller	Dilli, Kya korva?	What has happened in Delhi?	Dilli mein kya hua?
27. Receiver	Ha! Ha! Ha! (Asaan)	Ha! Ha! Ha! (laughing)	Ha! Ha! Ha! (hansna)
28. Caller	Vuni bihizyava sokha saan	Relax now	Ab sakun se rahna
29. Receiver	Ha! Ha! Ha! (Asaan) Accha che katev chukch? Srinagar ha	Ha! Ha! Ha! (laughing) O.K. where are you? In Srinagar?	Ha! Ha! Ha! (hansna) Accha tum kahan ho. Tum Srinagar mein ho?
30. Caller	_____	_____	_____
31. Receiver	Che chukha Srinagar?	Are you in Srinagar?	Tum Srinagar mein ho?
32. Caller	Na, mein kor tate chutee	No, I am no longer there	Ab mein wahan nahin hoon
33. Receiver	Che chukh vanay varmullay?	Are you now at Baramulla?	Kya tum abhi Baramulla mein ho?
34. Caller	Aa	Yes	Haan
35. Receiver	Accha	O.K.	Accha
36. Caller	Tate kar mein chutee	I have left the place	Mein ne wahan chod diya hai
37. Receiver	Accha	O.K.	Accha
38. Caller	Accha. Khuda hafiz	O.K. God bless you	Accha. Khuda hafiz
39. Receiver	Khuda hafiz	God bless you	Khuda hafiz
40. Caller	Accha tharva?	O.K. should I keep the phone?	Kya mein phone rakhun?
41. Receiver	Accha tharva	O.K. keep the phone	Haan phone rakh do



# Backpage

WITH the voters having spoken in Gujarat, can we hope that the high-decibel rhetoric which has so dominated headlines for the last nine months will come to an end? Even since the unfortunate day on 28 February, when a carriage of the Sabaramati Express was torched, incarcerating 48 'Ram bhakts' on their return from Ayodhya, and triggering off one of the worst episodes of communal blood-letting in the state, discourse in the country has remained polarised. Little wonder that many saw the hustings in Gujarat as a fight for India's soul.

Like all slogans, this one too was marked by hyperbole, creating visions of a resurgent, rampaging Hindutva in the event that the Modi led BJP won. Well it has, and resoundingly, its spectacular gains in the polarised terrain of central Gujarat far overshadowing the losses in regions less affected by the riots. Nevertheless, despite the gleeful pronouncements of VHP leader Praveen Togadia that India will become a Hindu *rashtra* in the next two years, the statement needs to be dismissed as mere rhetorical flourish.

Our reading of the electoral/political future of the country, at least till the general elections of 2004, depends crucially on how we assess the Gujarat verdict. The results, at least in hindsight, seemed never in doubt. To have expected the Congress, a party which had been lying dormant for close to a decade, and worse was marked by factionalism, to overcome in a few months the lethargy of the past and successfully combat a high voltage, polarising and fear and insecurity driven campaign of the BJP, seems in retrospect to have been wishful thinking.

And yet, so many of us bought into that hope, even after opinion and exit polls indicated a clear victory for Modi. Surely it was not all due to the fact that in the 'secular, progressive camp' Modi has acquired the status of a hate figure comparable to Hitler and Milosevic? Or was it the assessment that a strategy hinging on anti-incumbency, local caste calculations and what the media describes as 'weak Hindutva', would prove sufficient? Finally, is it that an alliance of Kamal Nath and Vaghela, both competent and amoral managers of electoral machines, was seen as a match for the Modi-Togadia combine?

A final assessment can be made only after a careful scrutiny of the detailed results, in particular the margins of victory/defeat in different constituencies. One fact, however, stands out. Converting the electoral bat-

tle into one of secularism and *manavata* versus communal fascism and the break-up of India, as sections of the media (both print and TV) were prone to do, painting the vast majority of Gujarati Hindus as bigots, and insufficiently engaging with fear and insecurity bred by terrorism in a border state marked by a history of communal violence only contributed to a voter polarisation. The BJP spin doctors are not far wrong when they gleefully remark that the Congress won their battle for them.

This does raise a serious quandary for the liberal mind. How is one to confront a hate-filled campaign without sacrificing the interests of the victims and survivors – for justice and dignity, peace and reconciliation? Not that the Congress, as the principal opposition, managed to do either. Would a head-on clash with the BJP-VHP-Bajrang Dal, aggressively rubbing their claim as 'true' protectors of both Hinduism and the 'nation' been better? How we resolve this quandary may well shape politics in the proximate future.

Attention is already shifting towards possible re-alignments in the BJP camp, on a possible resurgence of the hardliners with issues like Ayodhya, conversion and so on taking centre-stage. What happens to the NDA style coalitional politics if the BJP decides to go at it alone? What happens to a somewhat 'discredited' Vajpayee line of official moderation since it is clear that it is Narendra Modi who delivered Gujarat after a series of electoral debacles? Equally, how does the Congress rework itself to meet the challenges of the 2003 state elections, more so since it lost three crucial bye-elections in Rajasthan?

Many of us would like to believe now that the battle has been won, saner heads will prevail and the state BJP will return to basic issues of governance – growth, jobs, reconciliation. Narendra Modi's statement that it may be possible to win elections without Muslims, one cannot rule without them, is seen as reflective of this thinking. Nevertheless politicians and political parties are loath to give up what they perceive to be a winning hand.

How these matters get resolved remains an open question. What one hopes is that when debating 'weighty' issues like political strategy, we do not once again relegate the victims/survivors to the backburner. Without reconciling the twin demands of justice and inter-communal harmony our claims as a civilized people remain suspect.

**Harsh Sethi**

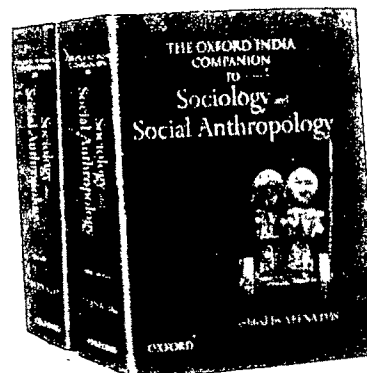


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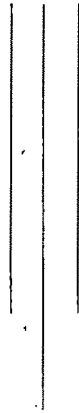
**OXFORD**  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

- **Kolkata:** Plot No.A1-5, Block GP, Sector V, Salt Lake Electronics Complex, Kolkata 700091
- **Delhi:** 2/11 Ansari Road, Daryaganj, New Delhi 110002 • **Chennai:** Oxford House, 219 Anna Salai, Chennai 600006
- **Mumbai:** 167, Vidyannagar Marg, Kalina, Santacruz (east) Mumbai 400098

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- Swarna Rajagopalan** Rebuilding Afghanistan (February 2002)
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- Jodi L. Jacobson and Rupsa Mallik** Reproduction rights and U.S. international assistance (December 2002)

## IN MEMORIAM

- V.N. Narayanan** Anil Agarwal 1947-2002 (February 2002)
- Rajni Kothari** I.S. Gulati 1924-2002 (July 2002)

## OTHERS

- Porous Borders, Divided Selves** East is east, west is west (Report, February 2002)
- Beyond Numbers** State population policies (March 2002)
- Society Under Siege** Reports (May 2002)
- Where People Matter** Kashmir here, Kashmir there (June 2002)

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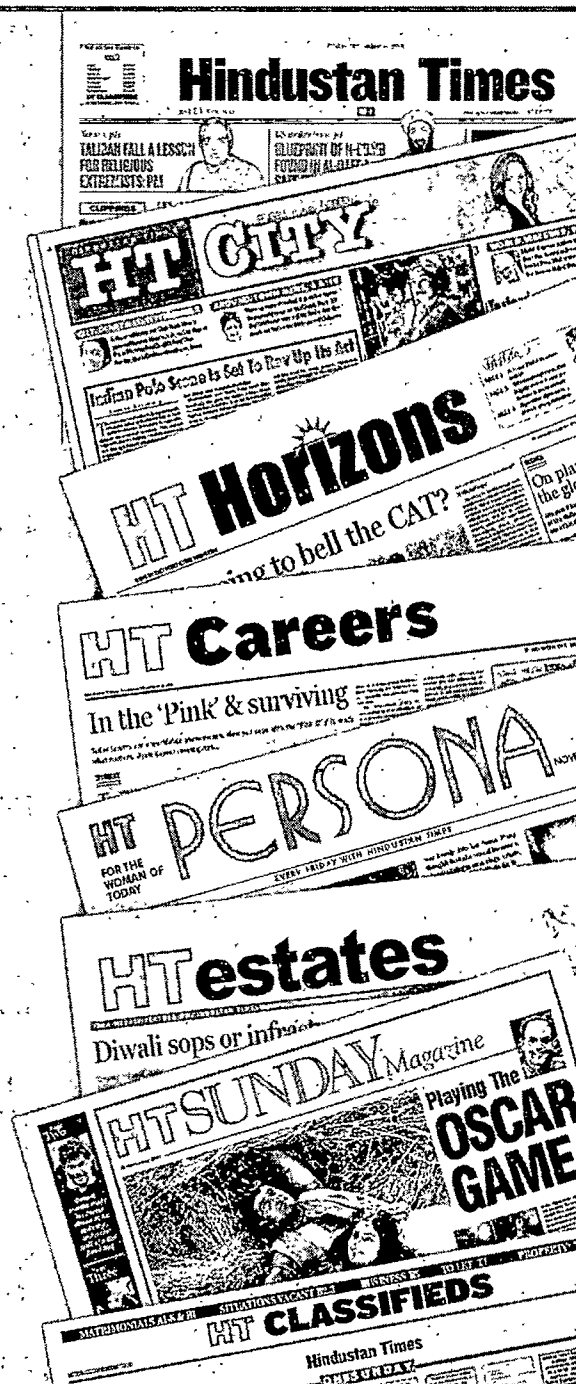
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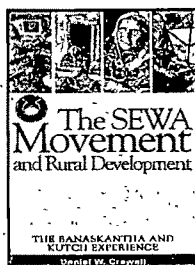
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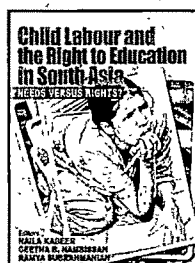
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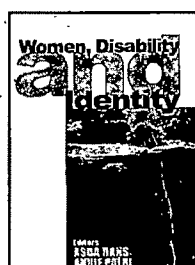


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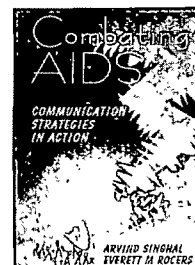
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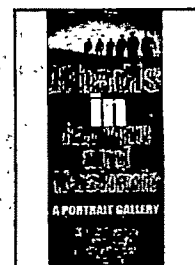
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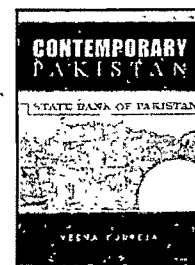
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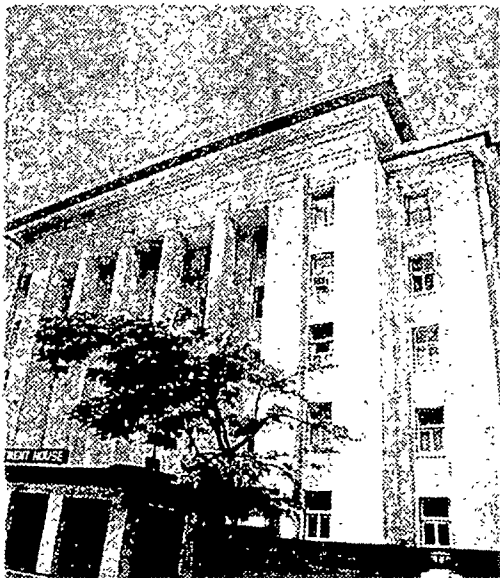
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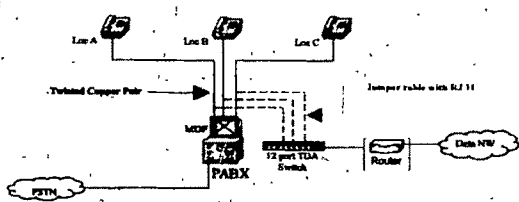
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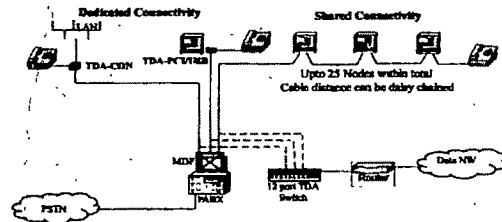
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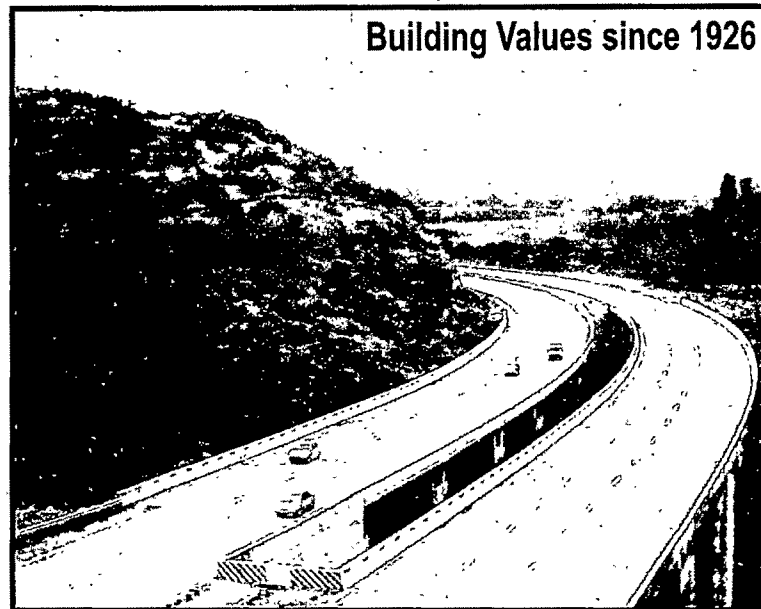
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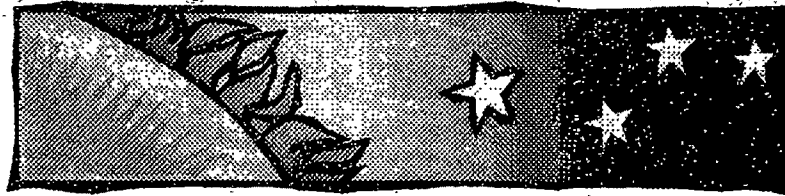
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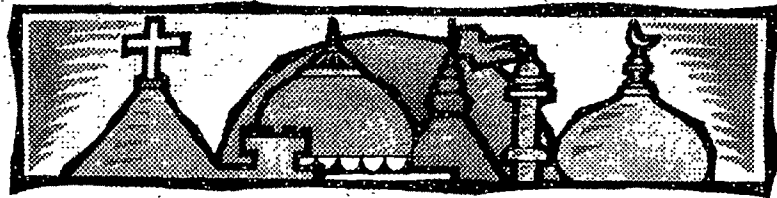
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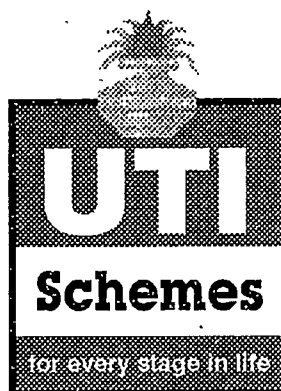
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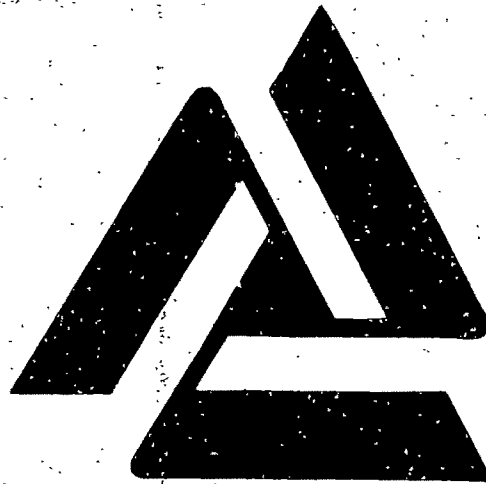
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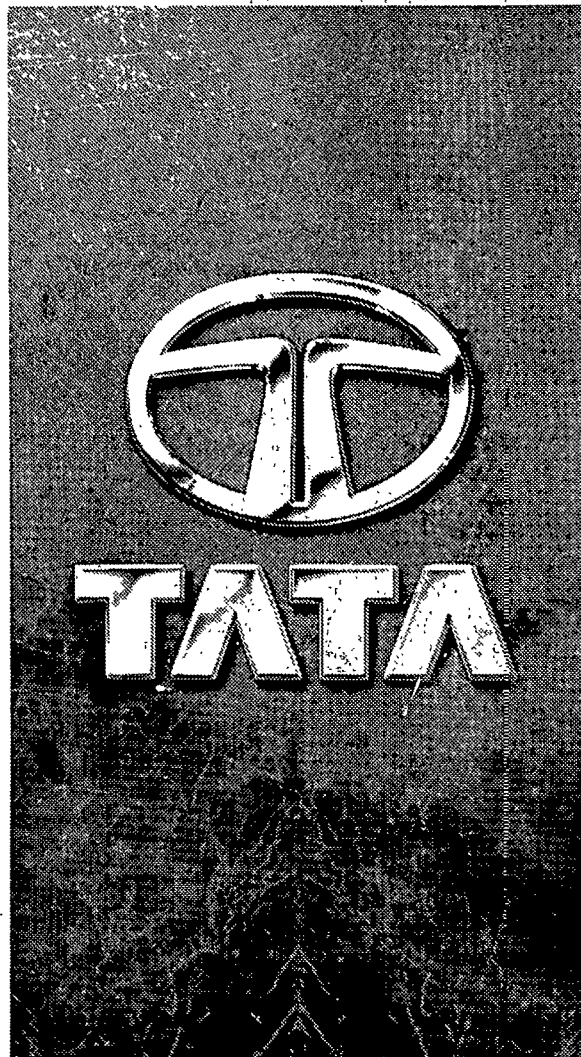


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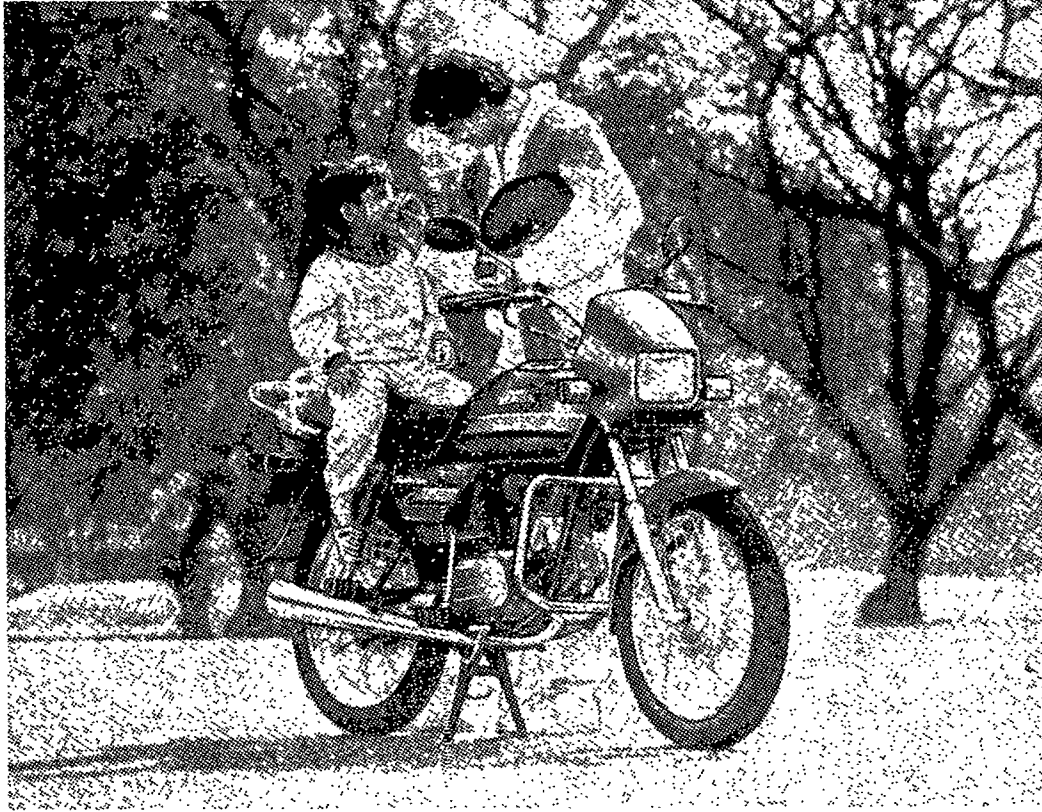
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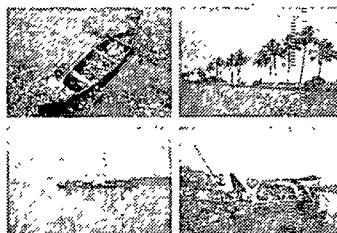
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Boats sail. Life flows. And suddenly, you're a poet.*

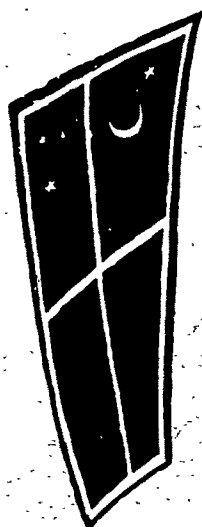


  
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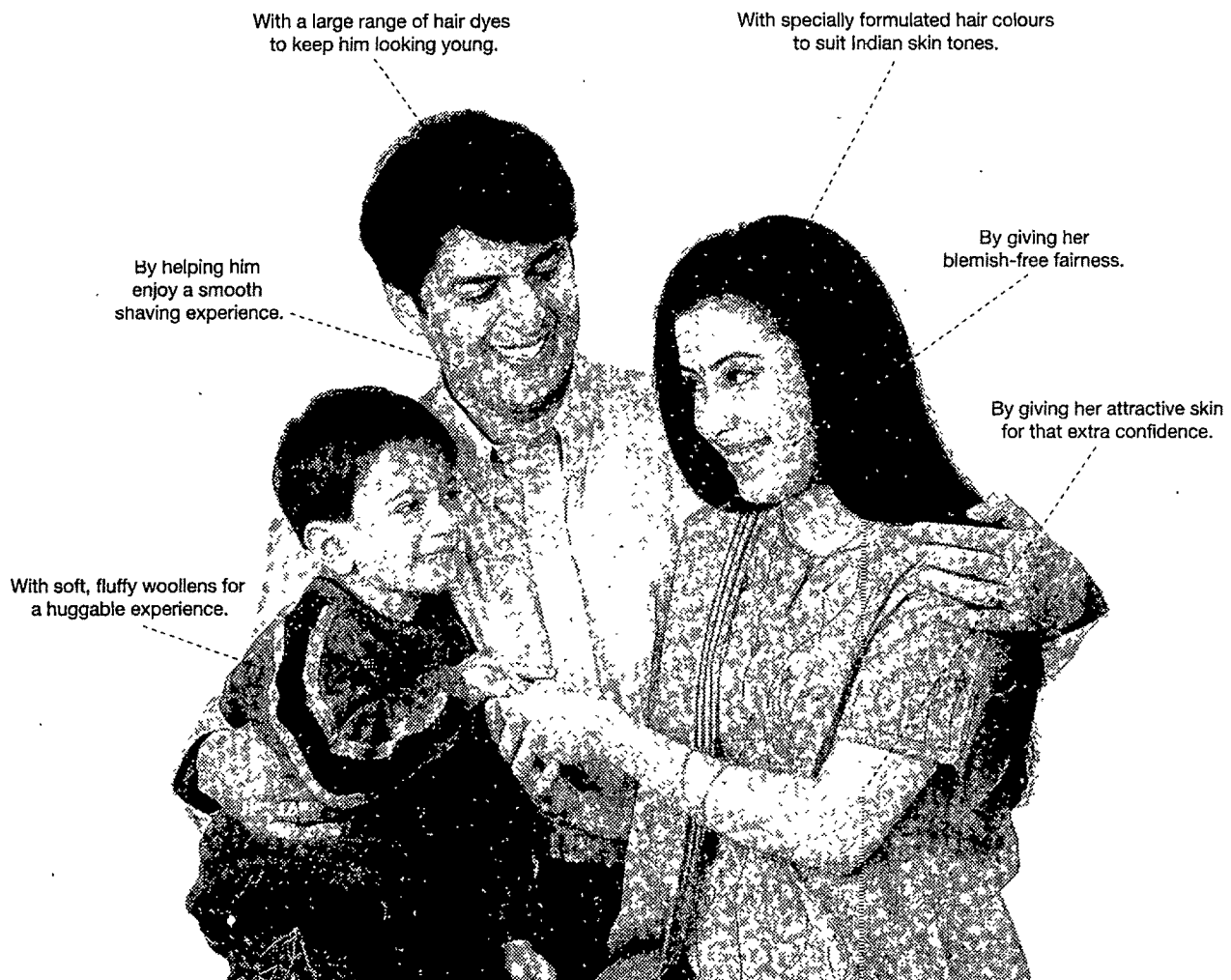
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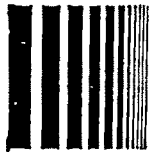
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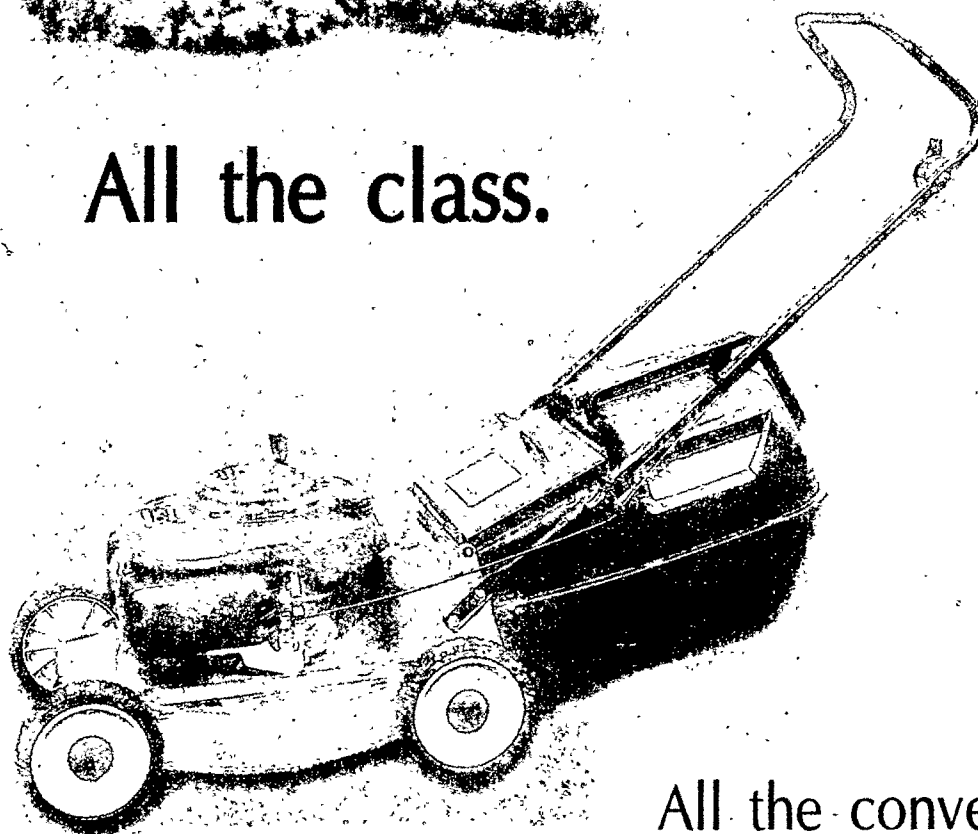
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## REWRITING HISTORY

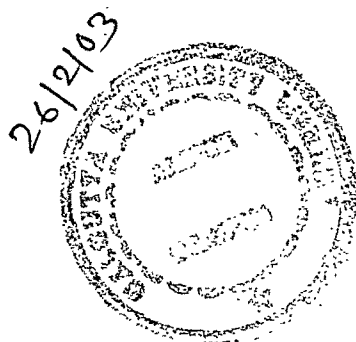
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# The problem

THE idea of rewriting history is under a cloud. From the discussion that has followed the ICHR move to stop the publication of the Towards Freedom project volumes and the NCERT directive deleting passages from the existing school textbooks, the very notion of rewriting has emerged tainted, as if it inevitably means the play of hidden hands, unrevealed agendas, manipulating minds. This is tragic. For historians, rewriting is a creative act; it is the way history as a mode of knowledge develops. In developing new perspectives historians critique dominant frameworks—their enclosing limits and repressions, their silences and erasures—and rework accepted notions of the past.

The past does not come to us with a unitary truth embedded within it; the facts that historians mine do not ever speak with one single voice. As our perspectives change we look at the past in new ways, reinterpret events, discover new meanings within them, pose new questions that could not even be formulated within the limits of earlier frameworks of analysis. So historians tell different stories of the same past, refigure evidence in diverse ways in the act of rewriting history—an act that enriches our conceptions of the past.

The act of rewriting history itself is not objectionable. But all forms of rewriting are not the same. If rewriting is so integral to the growth of historical knowledge, we need to continuously examine the nature of rewriting: the assumptions that underlie the arguments, the questions that are posed, the mode in

which knowledge is authenticated, the structure of the story that is elaborated. And in scrutinizing the process we need to differentiate between ways of rewriting that are legitimate and productive and those that are problematic and intellectually unacceptable.

It is through the practice of rewriting that historians of India have continuously rethought their notions of the past. History in India began its modern career implicated in projects of colonial knowledge. And post-colonial subjects, just as much as historians, have struggled against this legacy—a legacy embedded in the sources that were collected and stored, the institutions of research that were built up, and the colonial conceptions of history that became part of our commonsense.

When researches into India's past began in the late 18th century and early 19th centuries, Orientalist ideas structured historical representations. Inspired by the romanticism and classicism of the time, Orientalists like William Jones and H.T. Colebrooke returned to the ancient past, discovered its greatness and defined a specific notion of a glorious classical age. It was in this age, so the Orientalists told us, that the essence of Indian civilization—embodied in its language, laws, institutions and religious texts—came into being. Subsequent to this golden age there was a continuous or cyclical decline to a degenerate present before the British rule. If India had to develop, its lost past had to be rediscovered, its essence had to be properly understood, its juridical and religious texts had to be trans-

lated and canonized, its poetry had to be recaptured. The Orientalists saw themselves as the mediators who would define this relationship between the past and the present. As codifiers and translators they would be the ones to discover the ancient texts and ascribe to them their true meanings. As researches into ancient texts and projects of translation proliferated, and institutions and journals for Asiatic researches were set up, modern history in its colonial form began to take shape.

By the early 19th century, with liberalism gaining ground, Orientalist histories were questioned from within the fold of imperial thought. If Orientalists had glorified India's past, the liberals condemned it. From a veneration of classicality we moved to a phase of arrogant deification of modernity. Liberal histories idealized the modern West and the assumed principles of its order – individualism, freedom and democracy. They looked at the past through these overarching categories, searching for their roots and describing the stages of their unfolding. Other societies – of the past and present – were understood and characterized only in terms of the presence and non-presence of liberal values. While Orientalists had discovered in India's past a succession of golden ages, liberals like James Mill and Thomas Macaulay could see only shades of darkness.

In the West liberal histories traced a series of great transitions – from darkness to light, irrationality to rationality, magic to science, superstition to reason.

Modernity had emerged from the age of darkness, through the Renaissance and Enlightenment into the modern age. In India and other 'dark continents', as the liberals saw it, this transition never took place. India had remained unchanged, constrained by the social institutions that defined it – caste, village community and Oriental despotism.

For the liberals the dynamism of historical time in the modern West contrasted with the static time of the Orient. This immobility, they underlined, could only be broken with the intervention of an external temporality – the civilizing power of the West. Within the frame of this liberal history, British rule provided the moment of great rupture, when a primitive, static, backward, caste ridden, Oriental despotic society was transformed and modernized in progressive stages through education, rule of law, railways, expansion of the market and diffusion of useful scientific knowledge.

By the late 19th century, imperial representations of Indian history changed yet again. The mutinies in the army, the cycles of peasant rebellions and the anti-colonial stirrings in urban areas, created a profound sense of imperial anxiety. Faced with an inner crisis, liberalism lost its enthusiasm for reform and its moral commitment to the civilizing mission. Histories of India were now cast in frames that underlined the impossibility of change in the East. Structured by racial, climatic and evolutionary theories, historical explanations focused on the innate inferiority of

Indians, the degenerative effects of Indian climate and the problems of a diseased landscape. The myth of the lazy native, and the idea of the 'tropic' as a debilitating space emerged as framing tropes of historical analysis.

Nationalist histories developed in opposition to imperial and communal frames. But critiques very often remain tied to the frameworks they seek to transcend. Assumptions and terms naturalized by earlier discourses become part of accepted common sense and shape the nature of subsequent reasoning. And when new arguments are framed in terms of these old assumptions, their truth is reinscribed, their taken for granted status is reaffirmed. Purging these ideas, questioning their truth, then becomes a long and complicated intellectual process. In many ways post-colonial intellectuals are still involved in a project that the nationalist intelligentsia initiated.

While the nationalists mounted a critique of colonial ideas, they continued to accept many of the key categories through which imperial representations of Indian society were fashioned. Nineteenth century imperial history had shrouded India's past in darkness, denuded its history of any evidence of change and achievement, and stamped its people with permanent marks of inferiority. To constitute a sense of self, nationalists returned to the ancient past and rewrote history, identifying golden ages when literature and culture flourished, economy and society developed, territories were unified and law and order were established.

But in critiquing liberal histories, nationalists borrowed from the Orientalists, transforming the founding Orientalist notions of India's past – the idea of classical golden ages and the corollary myth of a subsequent civilizational decline – into accepted orthodoxies of Indian history. In countering the imperial narrative of progress under British rule, nationalists told a story of colonization, British exploitation and national impoverishment. But they continued to see the 18th as a dark century – a time of chaos and anarchy, internecine wars and breakdown of society. And in looking at the past and present, they operated with western modernist ideas of what constituted progress, and what was to be criticized as primitive, backward and irrational.

Similarly, while struggling against communal representations, nationalist histories operated with a series of communal assumptions. While communalism saw nationalism as the articulation of community interests, nationalists sought to subordinate the lan-

guage of the community to that of the nation and individual rights. Communal histories filled the past with stories of inter-community conflict and violence, nationalists saw in the past a comforting history of amity and unity. But most nationalist histories continued to periodize pre-colonial history through religious categories. They referred to ancient India as Hindu and medieval India as Muslim – as if a unitary religious essence permeated the entire age and the whole society. They reaffirmed the communal idea of 'Muslim tyranny' – an idea that transformed all Muslims into one evil mould, and implicated them all, whether high or low, in the practice of a power that they had little association with.

In the years after independence the battle of frameworks was replayed in new contexts. As professional history matured in India, the secular nationalist vision was articulated within a left-liberal paradigm in opposition to imperial and communal conceptions of history. Against the imperial view that India was not a nation but a conglomerate of discrete castes and communities at war with each other, the nationalists had earlier emphasized the notion of an essential unity beneath diversity, and projected into the ancient past the modern idea of a centralizing nation state, valorizing the processes of territorial expansion and unification of kingdoms.

This question of nationhood remained central to post-colonial reflections, but the terms in which it was conceptualized changed in many ways. Instead of seeing the nation fully formed from ancient times, the history of India was now seen as a process of nation in the making. All social and cultural movements, all reform agendas of the 19th century, were read as part of the wider struggle for modernity and nationhood. Histories of peasant and tribal rebellions merged with histories of nation making, each revolt of the 19th century became a stage in the manifestation of nationality.

This concern with nationhood was reflected at various other levels of historical study. If the Indian nation came into being within the context of colonialism, if Indian nationalism was forged through an anti-colonial movement, then the working of colonialism had to be probed deeper. Building on early nationalist insights, historians in the 1960s and '70s explored the idea of colonialism within a framework influenced by Marxist debates on modes of production. Colonialism was conceptualized as a specific structure and located within the system of world capitalism; backwardness was seen as a systemic logic, and development under colonialism was shown to be inevitably thwarted and distorted.

While historians of modern India were absorbed in the study of nationalism and colonialism, historians of ancient and medieval India set about dismantling the vast baggage of stereotypes that imperial histories had produced. The ideas of pre-colonial societal stasis, self-sufficient village communities, Oriental Despotism, were all subjected to deconstructive scrutiny. Through these categories the West had constituted an East that was in essence the inverse of the West, a difference that could be understood only through a rhetoric of contrasts that defined two opposed civilizations, one progressive the other primitive. In the West there had been continuous development and growth, India had been static; in the West we see an expansion of market and a process of urbanization, India was a land of self-sufficient village communities where these forces of change could not penetrate; progress in the West was powered by a protestant work ethic, in India it was inhibited by an oppressive caste system; science and rationality modernized the West but failed to develop in India. In the decades after independence, historians struggled against these stereotypes, looking for evidence of money economy, market expansion, urbanization, technological change, agrarian growth and expansion of artisanal production in ancient and medieval pasts.

Within imperial metropolitan centres, decolonization led to another kind of rethinking of the colonial experience. The aggressive imperial voice lost its persuasive power. The new histories that emerged sought to negotiate a position in between the old imperial histories and their new nationalist critiques. This dialogue defined the terms in which the arguments were framed. In opposition to the nationalist valorization of the idea of Indian unity, historians of the Cambridge School (CS) focused on the history of communities, castes and localities. While nationalists traced a long history of harmony and amity between communities, CS pointed to the equally long history of conflict. Nationalists saw colonialism as a moment of great rupture; CS underlined the powerful elements of continuities between pre-colonial and colonial societies. Nationalists emphasized the determining role of imperialism in restructuring Indian society; CS stressed on the shaping power of inner institutions and local situations, on the indigenous roots of colonial transformations. Nationalists conceptualized nationalism as an ideology of anti-imperialism; CS saw it as a site for the play of other interests – caste, community, region, locality and self. While the CS critique was important in pointing to a range of silences in nationalist arguments, it was framed in deeply problematic ways.

By the 1980s history writing in India saw a new phase of dramatic change. Influenced by the new social history in England and the cultural turn in social sciences, *Subaltern Studies* challenged the elitism of earlier histories that attributed historical agency to the elites and looked at the world from above. Subaltern histories emphasized the need to understand the experiences and lives of the dominated – peasants and workers, tribals and lower castes, women and dalits – people who leave few written records, whose voices are difficult to hear, whose actions appear inconsequential. The cultural turn in history writing all over the world shifted the focus away from economist and reductive reading of historical processes. Power and domination, economy and society, experience of work and leisure, identities and interests, were all seen as culturally constituted. Over the last two decades, ecological histories brought nature in, gender studies made historians sensitive to the masculinist assumptions of existing histories, and histories of discourse refigured the old history of ideas in new ways.

The changes in history writing have thus occurred through intense debates and disputations, conceptual ruptures and shifts in frames. It is this process of dialogue that has dynamized the field of history in the last fifty years after Indian independence, opening up new landscapes of understanding. We have moved from the old history woven around the biography of powerful individuals to explorations of historical processes and structures, from the actions of elites to the lives of the repressed, from grand histories to thick analysis of small events – exploring the macro through the micro, the world through the grain – from masculinist frames to an understanding of the gendered nature of historical experiences, from modernist narratives of progress to critical reflections on the meaning of progress, from celebratory stories of the conquest of nature to a discovery of the complex ways in which human history is linked to nature and culture.

Problems of understanding inevitably remain. Historians continue to grapple with the conceptual premises of their analysis and search for new ways of looking at the past. If the 1950s and '60s was a period of enchantment with nationalism and modernity, the 1980s and '90s has been a time of radical disenchantment. Nationalist histories had evolved in opposition to a baggage of imperial ideas; historians today are seeking to go beyond nationalist frames, which (as the essays of Sumit Sarkar and Sivaramakrishnan here demonstrate) have a tendency to absorb all new research within its tight embrace. We need to get away

from the unilinear teleologies of nationalism and modernity, their heroic emancipatory narratives. We have to probe their exclusions and open up their totalizing closures.

Rewriting of history is therefore undoubtedly necessary. It is an act that infuses history writing with life and energy. But it is not a project that can be given over to those who seek to destroy the very conditions of its possibility. The political moves to stop the publication of the volumes of the Towards Freedom project, delete passages from the existing NCERT textbooks and to rewrite these texts do not reveal a will to explore new horizons. They are declarations of a war against academic history itself, against the craft of the historian, against the practices that authenticate historical knowledge.

In what sense is history writing under attack? Professional historical scholarship matured in India in the years since independence. The writing of history in a sense became tied to the elaboration of the democratic, liberal, socialist, humanist vision of Nehruvian India. As postcolonial India sought to define its identity in relation to its colonial heritage, historians turned to a critique of imperial narratives and colonial stereotypes of India's past. With the general consolidation of a humanist intelligentsia in the Nehruvian era, the field of history came to be dominated by left liberals committed to the idea of a secular, democratic society. Through the fifties and sixties the growing hegemony of this intelligentsia was manifest in its control of the cultural institutions of society and their active involvement in fashioning a new public. Moved by the optimism of the age and the urge to provide the children of new India with a post colonial history of India's past, many of the finest minds plunged into the task of writing textbooks when the NCERT was set up in the mid-sixties.

Yet the strength of this liberal consensus was somewhat illusory. Beneath the intellectual hegemony at the top other forces were at work. A range of alternative narratives of the past undercut the new nationalist history that was taking shape. We see the production of this alternative sensibility at least at three different levels. Partha Chatterjee's essay in this issue points to one level. As history became professionalized in the 20th century, dominated by academics grounded in the art of archival research, the 'old social history' was displaced from academia. While this history was modernist – in the sense that it too sought to authenticate its arguments through reference to archival sources – it was tied to the culture of the region and the com-

munity, and implicated in the politics of sectarian conflicts. Dislodged from the academia it continued to flourish outside it.

Beneath this level that Chatterjee discusses there were others. Within the schooling system we see a similar layering of knowledge. The vision of a new Nehruvian India was expressed in the histories produced by the NCERT. Written in opposition to colonial and communal representations of the past, the NCERT texts sought to present a secular nationalist history that focused on our common past, our shared heritage, our collective struggles, foregrounding the bonds that tied the nation together rather than the sectarian and communal strife that tore communities apart.

While these texts were increasingly prescribed all over India, the number of schools that accepted the NCERT system remained small. Out of a total of around 1,25,000 recognized secondary and higher secondary schools in India no more than 6200 schools are at present under the CBSE, though a larger number of schools accept the NCERT syllabus up to class eight. Outside the NCERT system, within schools run by community organizations and political parties, children were being socialized into a different cultural sensibility.

The Saraswati Shishu Mandirs that the Jan Sangh began setting up in the early 1950s proliferated all over the country, the number of schools controlled by the Vidya Bharatis booming to over 4000 by the 1990s. In these shishu mandirs – discussed by Tanika Sarkar in this issue – the nationalist secular history was turned upside down. While the NCERT texts were formally accepted in these schools for the purposes of public examination, a supplementary course on Bharatiya Sanskriti initiated children to the 'real' history of India.

In this history, all creativity is traced back to the pre-Muslim past, all glory is discovered in ancient India. From the medieval times follows a long history of Hindu suffering and Muslim oppression. Hindus are inevitably the heroes of this history, Christians and Muslim the embodiment of all that is evil, the enemies of the nation. Hinduism provides the unitary essence of India, and Hindus are its only true citizens. For centuries Hindus had fought against injustice, against the aggression of invaders, and they needed to continue this struggle for freedom to eliminate the stains of the Muslim past.

If the past has been witness to a history of Hindu tolerance and Muslim tyranny, the present requires the Hindus to empower themselves, transcend their



effeteness, assert their masculinity and erase the painful history of past wrongs. The call to Hindu assertion here becomes a metaphor for a war against Muslims. In the madrasas, as Nita Kumar shows in her essay, we again see a multiplicity of texts and heterogeneity of teaching. The NCERT texts are accepted for the purposes of examination, but students are initiated to the teachings of Quran, reaffirming the significance of defining their identity in relation to the text. This is particularly so in the madrasas run by the madrasa boards.

Outside the schooling system, in the bazaar, popular tracts on local and national histories circulate another mode of historical knowledge. Cheaply produced and widely read, these tracts, in fact, structure the quality of popular historical sensibility. Many of these tracts are cast in a mythic mode, but they are sites of present sectarian battles. We see seemingly ancient myths refigured to convey communal meanings, and present political projects legitimated through mythic returns to the past. Popular faith and belief, notions of collective hurt and wrong, do not exist frozen in an immemorial time; they do not come down to us with a fixed essence – already formed in the mists of time. They are constituted and refigured through practices of cultural production and modes of socialization, through ideological battles and pedagogic interventions: the nature of teaching, the ideas naturalized through textbooks and circulated through popular tracts. The politics of Ramjanmabhoomi and the nightmare of Gujarat cannot be imagined without the passion and emotion that this structured faith generates.

Symbolic power often breeds a sense of complacency. The iconic status of many left and liberal intellectuals, the international appreciation of the histories they produced, their control over the key academic institutions of society, created a deceptive sense of self-assurance, a false idea of the hegemonic power of secular, nationalist ideals. Events of the last decade and a half have gradually dented this self-confidence of the Nehruvian intelligentsia. Denied academic status and lacking symbolic power, the other 'histories' that flourished outside academia, are now questioning the status of academic history, the premises of its knowledge and craft.

In a perverse enactment of the return of the repressed, these other 'histories' threaten to arise from their submerged locations, their life in the bazaar and shishu mandirs, and assert their right to power – their right to be patronized by the state, prescribed in the textbooks that children read. Academic historians have for

long ignored the reality of these alternate 'histories', the logic of their production, the nature of the historical sensibilities they produce. If we have to resist the threat they pose to the practice of academic history, we need to understand these other histories, explore their inner structure and the premises of their popularity. And as Chatterjee emphasizes, we need to think of ways in which creative history writing, as yet confined to the academia, can enter the domain of the popular.

What is this craft of the historian that I see under threat? Academic history writing is emphatically a modern discipline. The history of its growth is intimately linked to the history of modernity – a history that no critique of modernism has been able to transcend. Even the most radical anti-modernist history, I suggest, is profoundly modernist.

In what sense is this so?

Nineteenth century positivism established the discipline of evidence as the foundation of historical truth. Keen to establish a secure basis of knowledge and convinced that science provided the framework of all valid knowledge, positivists sanctified facts and records as the repository of truth; the verifiability of the fact was to guarantee the truth of what was said, its objectivity, its claim to scientific status. It was as if truth was embedded in the records, inhered in the evidence. With the discovery of more and more facts, the reality of the past was to unfold before the historian, part by part. The naive notion of knowledge that underlines this simple positivist formulation has long since been given up. We know now that there is no one truth embedded in records, waiting to be revealed. We can look at evidence in different ways, and reconstruct the past in diverse forms. Historical knowing is a process of selecting, reading, representing, interpreting and narrating. And our ways of narrating define in a sense the reality that is captured in the history that we produce.

Yet, can history get away from this discipline of evidence? If we talk of evidence and record, do we inevitably succumb to the epistemological naivety of positivism? The anti-realist turn and the persuasive power of narrativism and constructionism has created amongst sensitive historians a complicated, ambivalent relationship with a set of binary categories inherited from positivism: fact/fiction, history/myth, truth/falsehood. The old terms of these oppositions can no longer be sustained, the lines of difference as they were perceived earlier have been powerfully critiqued. But can we merge the categories together? I think we need to rethink such categories in new ways, problematizing them, opening them up for scrutiny, refiguring them,

without necessarily giving them up. To throw the categories overboard would be to destroy the conceptual possibilities of differentiating between different forms of knowledge. It would be to undermine the very basis of history as a discipline.

Documents and records, purged of their positivist heritage, provide both the possibilities and limits of historical understanding. Historians can enter the past, return to it, and study it only if the past leaves a trace. The trace, as Ricoeur eloquently argues, remains as witness to what has passed away, what once was; it invites us to follow it back, to discover the trail; it directs our search, our quest. If we lose the trail, if the trace is lost, then the past remains hidden, unknown. Traces of the past are inscribed in documents, in records, and are preserved as archives. In this sense history is a mode of knowledge through traces, it is based on documents and archives. 'If history is a true narrative,' says Ricoeur, 'document constitutes its ultimate means of proof. They nourish its claim to being based on facts.'<sup>1</sup>

The notion of what constitutes document can change, the field of evidence can expand (from inscription to artefacts, written texts to visual/oral records, printed sources to memory), the search for new types of evidence inspired by new ideas and themes of research continues, and documents may be read in conflicting ways. But history remains a discipline of evidence; historical imagination is subject to the constraint of 'what happened in the past', a constraint very different to the limits that define fiction and myth as modes of knowledge. The historian has to relate to a pre-figured past – the past gone by, refigure this past through the act of historical understanding, into a configured past – the past of the historian's narrative. To give up the notion of the trace and the document is to announce the death of history.

That is why we need to be more than wary of efforts to cleanse textbooks, erase evidence of the past, repress uncomfortable traces, or stop the production of an archive of sources that reveals disconcerting realities. When we are told that Aryans were actually the original inhabitants of India, or that the Indus Valley civilization is post-Aryan, or that the Indus people domesticated horses, and that cows were never slaughtered in ancient India, we need to recognize that these claims represent something more than minor disputes over factual details of our past, something more than a

conflict over reading and representing evidence. When community sentiments of pain and hurt become the ground on which we rework our past, when we rewrite history to cleanse it of all that we seek to disown, then we are witnessing a practice of rewriting that is disturbingly problematic. These are moves that attack the very discipline of academic history.

Narratives of the past that are freed from the 'discipline of evidence', from the constraint of the archive, operate within a framework of knowledge that is not history in the modern sense of the term that we are discussing. Yet we cannot dismiss these narratives. If they are constructed without reference to records, if they fabricate history, we need to understand the nature of that fabrication: the structure of the story that is told, the politics of its production, and the strategies deployed to authenticate the story.

If these accounts repress evidence of the past or invent records, we have to look at the logic of that repression, the meaning of the invention. If these narratives appeal to our mythic imagination, we need to see how these 'modern myths', as Ernst Cassirer called them, are distinct from 'traditional myths', how they use the language of tradition in instrumental ways to reconstruct the public mind. Several essays in this issue of *Seminar* address these questions in different ways.

All history is in a sense political. By defining our past, it fashions our identity, our location in the world, our sense of self and the vision of the future. But all writing and rewriting of history is not political in exactly the same sort of way. To the extent that every term we use connotes a world of meaning and every representation of the past is structured by our frames of reference, history can never emancipate itself from the play of subjectivities, from the domain of the political. It can never be purified and sanitized into an unsullied objectivity.

But when history is mobilized for specific political projects and sectarian conflicts, when political and community sentiments of the present begin to define how the past has to be represented – what can be told and what had to be erased, when history is fabricated to constitute a communal sensibility, and a politics of hatred and violence, then we need to sit up and protest. If we do not then the long night of Gujarat will never end. Its history will reappear again and again, not just as nightmare but as relived experience, re-enacted in endless cycles of retribution and revenge, in gory spectacles of blood and death.

NEELADRI BHATTACHARYA

1. Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, Vol. III, Part IV, p. 117. Ricoeur helps us reconceptualize the notion of the trace, the document and the archive.

# The limits of nationalism

SUMIT SARKAR

TO start with the obvious: history, described famously by E.H. Carr many years ago as the ever-changing dialogue of the present with the past, is necessarily being 'rewritten' all the time. The immediate issues that have given this question great topicality and high media profile need not be rehearsed again. Briefly, they relate to the current state-backed Hindutva drive to 'rewrite' history through an onslaught on established historiography.

I would like rather to look first at a more basic question, about possible criteria for distinguishing between less and more valid versions of the past. Complications have arisen here through today's widespread relativistic moods, ever suspicious of vestiges of outdated 'positivism' and illicit assumptions of 'facticity' in any expression of preference.

Historians, or at least many among them, are less philosophically naïve than their critics often suppose. A growing number would be aware that their accounts are never more than representations, without any unmediated, one-to-one correspondence with a reality 'out there' in the past. But a distinction between levels might be helpful at this point. There is really no great problem so far as specific details about the past, like dates of rulers or events, or the actuality of a particular happening, are concerned. There tends to exist at any

given moment a broad consensus in such matters within state-of-the-art historical scholarship. This is grounded on currently accepted methods of assaying surviving traces of the past.

To cite a couple of brutally topical instances: the vast majority of medieval historians agree that there is no substance to the claim that the Babri Masjid had been built by destroying a Ram temple there, since there is a striking absence of contemporary testimony. (The same scholars would also agree, though perhaps with some embarrassment, that temples had been destroyed at times by some Muslim rulers, notably Aurangzeb). And, barring a massive destruction of a very wide range of contemporary evidence (survivors' accounts, a wealth of media reportage and footage, reports of the National Human Rights Commission and many other enquiries), the fact of state-backed genocide in today's Gujarat, one can hope, will not be seriously disputed in the future.

But history is not primarily about isolated 'facts' or details. It tries to select, arrange, analyse and explain them through narrative patterns which are diverse, open to change, often mutually conflicting. Relativistic doubts and questionings are not irrelevant or entirely unhelpful here. A bit of information about the past becomes a historical 'fact' only within a particular narrative, which would be based on a set of hypotheses or frame

of analysis. In a sense, then, it is 'constituted' by the latter.

Thus the perpetrators and defenders of the Gujarat carnage do not bother to deny that it has happened, for they have shown themselves eminently capable of justifying it within their own deeply ingrained terms of reference (to the extent of Modi planning the 'gaurav yatra', evidently in its honour). For them, it makes sense in terms of stereotypes, grounded in a particular historical frame. Hindus and Muslims are essentialised, homogeneous, inevitably and invariably mutually antagonistic entities across centuries, with Muslims as perpetual aggressors, violators of the sacred Hindu land, women, cows and temples, by definition today's terrorists and agents of Pakistan. Revenge for Godhra can then be visited on literally any Muslim, even the dead or the unborn (Vali Gujarati, Faiyaz Khan, the foetuses ripped out from the wombs of pregnant women).

**H**owever odious and repellent, the narrative frame at work here is not entirely easy to refute, for it is not a matter now of falsifiable specific detail, but a generalisation within which data that does not fit in can be declared to be exceptional (e.g., Akbar's tolerance as against Aurangzeb or Mahmud of Ghazni, sundry sycretistic cults, and so on). And surely all generalisations have exceptions, are equally based on choice and values of the writer – and so history at this, much more important level, is maybe inevitably and equally subjective?

Confronted with this dilemma, relativists with progressive (in this instance, anti-communal) values have been tempted sometimes to suggest a 'political' answer. Within what can be called an epistemologically level playing field of mutually opposed hypotheses or interpretative frames,

all of them equally incapable of verification, surely we are entitled to evaluation by political consequences and choose what is most appropriate or helpful for the cause one holds dear?

Through an apparently up-to-date and sophisticated path, we have come perilously close here to arguments of commitment, partisanship, or *partiinost* that had been common during the Stalin era. The radical cause is likely to be different today: not defence of the socialist state or proletarian revolution, but minority rights, feminism, Dalit empowerment, or the reclaiming of lost 'common property resources'. But the style of argument may not be dissimilar, and be in danger of falling into similar traps of elision of inconvenient aspects and proneness towards essentialisation of the entity or group one is trying to work for.

We might also be in serious danger of disarming ourselves by legitimating choice between alternative general frames in terms of favourable political consequences. One cannot then logically object to the use of such an argument by people we oppose or detest. History can then be freely rewritten to promote 'national' and/or 'Hindu' glory, and truth comes to reside with the bigger battalions. And surely, in times like ours, it is vital to give up the comfortable illusion that 'history' is somehow always 'on our side'.

**B**ut is there any other way through which we can legitimately choose between alternative general frameworks without sinking back into positivist naivete? Maybe a criterion of generative capacity or productiveness, in terms of, not political, but more strictly professional or scholarly consequences, might be helpful. Frameworks are demonstratively unequal here, for some have greater generative

capacity than others. They can stimulate more questions, seek to cover previously unexplored dimensions of life of greater numbers of peoples, broaden and deepen historical curiosity and understanding, maybe even help us to look more critically at our own everyday lives and relationships.

Such a perspective allows us to recognise the abiding value of the major breakthroughs in historiography on a world scale, achieved from the mid-19th century onwards through Marxism, the *Annales*, radical-populist histories from below, feminism, and efforts to move beyond Eurocentric confines – irrespective of and beyond the many doubts, criticisms and controversies that each of these nodal points have and will continue to provoke.

**T**he historiography of the Hindu Right necessarily sticks to periodization by religion: in effect, the religion of rulers, for that is the only way through which the premise of medieval 'Muslim domination' or 'tyranny' can be made credible. (Muslim peasants and artisans during the so-called 'Muslim period' were far from dominant, being quite often subordinated to Hindu landlords or trader moneylenders). It thus remains stuck to a narrow, top-down, elitist analytical frame.

Its other basic premise is an overwhelming emphasis on alleged authenticity by origin. The only real evil for it is religious, cultural or political domination coming from sources it considers external and alien, because non-Hindu. Every other kind of oppression or injustice within what it assumes to be the ever-present, putatively homogeneous Hindu nation, the many inequities and tensions along lines of caste, gender, class or ethnicities have to be subordinated, in history-writing and politics alike, to

the endless struggle against external aggression.

'Mainstream' or 'secular' anti-colonial nationalism has often tended to share the second of these premises. It has also been tempted often to unconditionally prioritize 'national' unity over internal divisions. For it, of course, the 'nation' would ideally include Muslims and other minorities as well as Hindus, and alien domination would be equated with colonial rule, not extended backwards over time to cover the 'Muslim' period. The distinctions are important, but the intertwinings have also been quite notorious, particularly in the latter part of the 19th century when incipient Hindu patriotic fervour so often sought safer literary expression through eulogizing 'freedom movements' directed against medieval Muslim kings (the Muslim literati counterpart here being the evocation of the glory of the medieval Islamic world). Crucially, the periodisation of Indian history into 'Hindu' and 'Muslim' eras persisted into quite recent times, providing the bedrock of even the bulk of serious academic research. It tends to implicitly condition much lower-level history teaching and common sense awareness even today.

The real break came with the rise of a much more sophisticated historiography from the 1950s and '60s pioneered by scholars like D.D. Kosambi, R.S. Sharma, or Irfan Habib. There was a veritable paradigm shift, particularly in ancient and medieval Indian history, producing a corpus which still remains obligatory reading for teaching or research wherever South Asian history is studied at any academically meaningful level in India or abroad.

Thus inscriptions and land grants came to be probed, no longer primarily for information about

ancient Indian kings, dynasties and conquests, but as entry-points into broader socio-economic relationships and questions of state formation. Impressive detailed studies of medieval agrarian, commercial, or artisanal structures similarly took the place of old-fashioned dynastic or military histories, and questions of technological change, surplus extraction, or peasant resistance came to be considered more significant than the personal bigotry or catholicity of rulers.

The shifts, particularly in ancient and medieval history, implied also a rupture with conventional nationalist historiography (which for these epochs often had been difficult to distinguish from communal approaches). To cite only the most obvious instance: the seamier, exploitative sides of ancient Indian civilization could no longer be occluded through assumptions of unique ancient 'Aryan' glory or 'golden ages'. Not that this alternative historiography has not had its problems, and indeed its limits are increasingly attracting legitimate academic attention and debate. Among them might be mentioned the influence at times of a reductive, economically-determinist kind of Marxism, and a proneness towards a centralised vision of subcontinental history flowing from its anti-colonial nationalist origins.

In terms of the criteria of generative potential that I have just outlined, however, its evident superiority over Hindu (or-Muslim) nationalist versions can be eminently justified on professional and intellectual grounds, and not just on the plane of political benefit. (Insinuations of success due to state patronage alone are also demonstratively false, as the reputation of the genre of scholarship I am referring to was built through the 1950s and '60s, well before the brief era of Nurul

Hasan as education minister). Today's Hindutva offensive, if allowed to succeed, would throw Indian historiography back 50 years or more and make of it once more the annals of good or bad kings, wars and conquests alone.

Secular, broadly left-nationalist historiography needs to be defended against the current onslaught, but I think it is indispensable also to become more aware of its many inadequacies. These are manifest most clearly in the area of modern or colonial Indian history, where there has been much less of a break with conventional nationalism than in ancient or medieval. The dominant historiographical assumption here, cutting across many otherwise widely varied approaches, has been that of a single, colonial/anti-colonial binary, setting both narrative pattern and standards of evaluation. The late-colonial era, in particular, tends to get collapsed into a unilinear saga of heroic freedom struggle, colonial repression and 'separatist' or 'divisive' tendencies that, acting in tandem with British divide-and-rule strategies, ultimately tarnished the coming of freedom with a tragic Partition.

I have already indicated how overlaps could easily take place here with Hindutva premises, for there is a temptation to equate value with 'authentic', indigenous origin. It may be noted in parenthesis that the Sangh Parivar has on the whole been much more aggressive so far with regard to 'Marxist distortions' of ancient and medieval history: apart from the *Towards Freedom* volumes, where the RSS is clearly nervous about what documents might reveal about its total non-participation in anti-British movements.

But the problem with secular nationalist historiography is not just that elements within it (e.g. an essential-

lised and unitary view of the 'nation') can sometimes get appropriated by Hindutva. More important to my mind, and the theme I seek to explore in the second part of this essay, are the ways in which its persistence has come to obstruct further academic development.

Research increasingly indicates that not everything in colonial South Asian history can or should be reduced to a single interpretative frame. Such an assumption occludes or distorts many largely autonomous narratives by imposing on them a single evaluative criterion of 'contribution', or otherwise, to anti-colonial endeavour or cultural authenticity. Paradoxically, it tends also to take away a lot from the richness and relevance of the history of anti-colonial nationalism by collapsing it into a simplistic story of heroes and villains.

**S**o far as frontline research is concerned, nationalist limits today manifest themselves mainly through a recurrent pattern of part-recuperation of new and promising advances into familiar moulds and controversies.

*Subaltern Studies* provides one excellent example. In its initial, 'history from below' days, it had helped to significantly modify and stretch the colonial/anti-colonial binary by emphasising rifts, tensions, elements of popular autonomy having complicated relationships of both impetus and constraint with 'elite' nationalism. But the implicit standard for evaluating such moments of subaltern autonomy tended still to be their contribution or otherwise to anti-colonialism.

The critique of nationalism has become much more prominent in the subsequent 'culturalist' phase. Paradoxically, however, the principal ground for rejecting the 'nation state project' still remains its origin in the modern West, leading to a colonial

discourse/indigenous authenticity binary that can slide at times towards cultural, though no longer political, nationalism.<sup>1</sup>

Very major advances have taken place in recent years in histories of subordinated castes and gender, both obviously stimulated by current socio-political developments. To take possibly the most striking instance: feminist influences and scholarship have rescued the narrative of 19th century middle class 'social reform' from a stale 'renaissance debate', and helped to transform it through a new focus on women's writings (previously almost entirely ignored) and the degree of self-activity or agency of those being sought to be emancipated by (predominantly male) reformers.

But narratives of movements for women's rights or lower caste affirmations do not fit easily into nationalist paradigms, whether political or cultural. Both made considerable use of elements of colonial policy, administration, and modern-western ideologies in efforts towards empowerment. Political loyalism for long went along with social critiques of caste and indigenous patriarchy, while nationalist leaders like Tilak on occasion took up aggressively conservative positions in such matters. One consequence has been a marked degree of embarrassment among many feminist scholars about 19th century reform efforts that had drawn on or sought to obtain British support.

**T**he concrete results of the movements for banning *sati*, legalising widow marriage, or raising the age of consent were no doubt limited, and the often undue glorification of over-

whelmingly male-initiated social reform certainly needed to be questioned. Yet women's issues had acquired a quite unprecedented and rare centrality, age-old norms had become unsettled, and there were signs of an emergent discourse of rights in the new emphasis on choice even in the arguments of conservatives.<sup>2</sup> The current stress on colonial recasting or consolidation of patriarchy can occasionally lead on also to romanticisations of the pre-colonial, where reform attempts become suspect through their 'alien' origin.

**T**he failure to go beyond the single evaluative standard set by the colonial/anti-colonial binary produces similar problems for histories of subordinate caste and Dalit protest. Arun Shourie's onslaught on Ambedkar typifies this tendency at its worst, but an indication of the difficulties is revealed by the interesting recent attempt by G. Aloysius to write an alternative history of modern India from a 'Dalit-Bahujan' perspective. Its many virtues include a valid stress on the complicities between colonialism and continued or refurbished high caste domination (a theme which Jyotiba Phule had opened up), as well as on the numerous overlaps between 'mainstream' nationalism and Hindutva. Even Nehru's *Discovery of India* is revealed as being not entirely immune from such contamination.

What remains curious, however, is Aloysius' terminology. To 'cultural nationalism', his term for the amalgam produced by such overlaps, he counterposes a 'political nationalism' of subordinated castes, into which is

2. For a sampling of the ongoing debates on such issues, see Lata Mani, *Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India*, University of Berkeley, 1998; and Tanika Sarkar, 'Enfranchised Selves: women, culture, and rights in 19th century Bengal', *Gender and History* 13(3), November 2001.

1. For an elaboration of this argument, see my 'Decline of the Subaltern in Subaltern Studies', in Sumit Sarkar, *Writing Social History*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1997, Chapter 3.

collapsed, in a fairly reductive manner, the aspirations also of the victims of class and patriarchal oppression. Through this emancipatory 'political nationalism', he suggests, the true 'nation' might one day 'come into its own'. 'Nation' and 'nationalism' still, then: one wonders why they remain so indispensable.<sup>3</sup>

**T**he emergence from around the 1980s of an almost totally new genre, environmental history, constitutes one of the most exciting features of the current South Asian historiographical scene. As with feminism and caste, there are clear connections here with recent developments: both the impact of world-wide concern and interest in 'green' issues, and the numerous impressive movements in defence of popular rights to forests, water, other natural resources and sometimes sheer survival. The pattern I have been outlining can be seen to be operative here too.

Environmental studies have achieved a virtual paradigm shift in emphasis towards communities of hunters and food-gatherers, pastoralists and shifting cultivators. Settled peasant villages no longer seem to have been quite as universal and unchanging a norm for South Asia as had been assumed for very long, for these other ways of relating to environments appear to have had a far from marginal presence till the late-colonial tightening up of all-round communicational, politico-military, administrative and economic integration. Much of what by the late 19th century had come to be assumed to be 'traditional' about India may have been constituted by colonial structures, policies and discourses.

But, once again, nationalistic hangups have been causing problems,

for it has been tempting for many to move from the valid emphasis on the overwhelmingly destructive colonial impact on migratory modes of living, to romanticisation of an 'arcadian' pre-colonial world of forests and other common property resources, free of inequalities and internal tensions. Forests and pastures, on the one hand, and settled agriculture, on the other, then tend to get unhelpfully separated from each other; environmental and agrarian histories become separate worlds.<sup>4</sup>

I take my last illustration from the realm where the colonial/anti-colonial binary in some ways has perhaps the greatest continuing relevance, that of economic history. From the times of Dadabhai Naoroji and Romeshchandra Dutt onwards, research in this area had for very long focused upon colonial economic exploitation. Its central themes and controversies had revolved around 'drain of wealth', deindustrialization, 'forced' commercialization of agriculture with predominantly negative consequences, and unfair tariffs and foreign capital domination obstructing indigenous capitalist development. Many of the questions raised by such debates have acquired new resonances in today's era of triumphant neo-colonialism, neo-liberal orthodoxy, and rapidly intensifying disparities of wealth and poverty on a world scale.

**I**n their own, often no doubt limited and somewhat naïve ways, nationalist economic historians had questioned the universal applicability of some of the dogmas of laissez-faire

4. Recent work on environmental history has been questioning these dichotomies: see, for instance, a number of essays in *Forests, Fields, and Pastures* (*Studies in History* 14(2), July-December 1998), and K. Sivaramakrishnan, *Modern Forests: Statemaking and Environmental Change in Colonial Eastern India*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1999.

based neoclassical economics. Yet, even in this domain, research has increasingly come up against the limits of an over-simple binary understanding. Thus, with the progress of region- and locality-oriented research, the extent (maybe sometimes even the reality) of deindustrialization, or of the allegedly forced and negative nature of commercialized agriculture, have been seen to vary widely across spaces, times, and specificities of handicrafts or crops. The persistence of a binary model has repeatedly drawn interesting new data and hypotheses back into the digits of familiar, and somewhat stale, controversies.<sup>5</sup>

**A** related problem concerns the built-in tendency of nationalist frameworks towards underplaying 'internal' tensions, and the reality, very often, of mutually profitable accommodation between foreign rule and Indian dominant groups. Arguments emphasising such collaboration in the early colonial phase, and a consequent degree of continuity with pre-colonial structures of power and exploitation, have been put forward notably by 'Cambridge' scholars like Chris Bayly. The suspicion such views have sometimes automatically aroused about 'neo-colonial' sympa-

5. A recent instance has been provided by Tirthankar Roy's thesis concerning the survival-cum-growth of small industries through the colonial era. The author courted unnecessary controversy for himself by occasional claims to have refuted the deindustrialization thesis, even though his new and often very important data regarding conditions of production in certain specific small industries in the 20th century comes from a time-span later than what had been the primary temporal location of that debate. The value of his empirical contributions consequently seem to be in some danger of being ignored by scholars of left-nationalist sympathies – or blown out of proportion by those with possible neo-colonial leanings. Tirthankar Roy, *Traditional Industry in the Economy of Colonial India*, Cambridge, 1999.

3. G. Aloysius, *Nationalism Without a Nation in India*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1997.



thies seem to be rather excessive and unnecessary.

The instances I have cited (and which can be added to, easily) indicate that the nationalist paradigm is increasingly becoming a barrier to fresh research and thinking. From this it does not follow, of course, that British domination and exploitation, and anti-colonial movements, can ever cease to be themes of abiding interest and importance for studies of modern Indian history. What I am suggesting is the need to move towards a recognition of the possibility of many narratives or 'histories'. Imposition, on an immensely varied subcontinental history, of a single unilinear narrative frame, and making the values derived from that the sole standard of evaluation, is both impossible and harmful.

**Y**et interconnections and a multitude of cross-currents remain important, and the search for them cannot be given up even while resisting the temptation of unilinear simplification and reductionism. Perhaps we can benefit here from the experience of feminist (particularly, socialist-feminist) history in the West. It could emerge, in the 1960s and '70s only through rejection of tendencies towards collapsing gender into class and production relations in the reductive manner characteristic of much orthodox Marxism. But, at its best, feminist history does not abstract gender studies from histories of evolving capitalist social forms.

A helpful metaphor for history, then, may not be a single track with neat 'stages', or even a 'stream', but multiple 'threads' that can intertwine as also move apart, with the criteria for evaluating them not one, but many. And such a broadening and complicating of visions may also be necessary for a richer understanding even of anti-colonial nationalism. Its value and significance lay, I would like to suggest

in conclusion, not primarily because it 'won us freedom', or because it had been an exceptionally heroic saga. Many countries won political independence in the post-1945 years due to the world situation, even without having the type of undoubtedly mass anti-colonialism that India witnessed, while some liberation movements (e.g. Vietnam, Algeria, South Africa) have had to be more heroic, because repression there had the capacity of being much more brutal. (Unhappy the land which has need for heroes, as Brecht made Galileo say.)

What remains impressive was a progressive expansion in the *meanings* of 'freedom', coming about precisely through internal conflicts, intense debates, a multitude of cross-currents and conflicts. It was in and through such contradictions that the content of the freedom being sought came to include democracy, a federal polity, secularism, a measure of social justice: all primarily quite new, and in that sense 'inauthentic' in terms of origin, it may be noted. That political and economic programmes came to be radicalized through the pressures of partly-autonomous peasant and labour movements has come to be widely recognized through subaltern and other left or radical-populist histories.

**B**ut would the post-1947 Indian political leadership have realized the need to combine equality with recognition of difference (through reservations), extended votes to women, or gone ahead with a measure of family law reform, without autonomous (and in some cases 'divisive') initiatives from subordinated castes or women's groups? The federal and secular features of post-1947 India, which so far have been able to block the strong majoritarian thrusts towards a unitary Hindu *rashtra*, can be explained, simi-

larly, only in terms of the existence and self-activity of diverse minority groups, both religious and ethnic.

It is seldom remembered that the draft resolution on aims and objectives with which Nehru had opened the Constituent Assembly on 13 December 1946 (in effect, the first draft of the present Preamble) had explicitly granted residual powers to the 'autonomous units' of the 'Indian Union'. The subsequent shift to a federation with an exceptionally strong Centre came about immediately after Mountbatten's Partition Award of 3 June 1947, with K.M. Munshi for instance openly expressing relief that 'strong central government' would now be possible, and no longer be sacrificed 'at the altar of preserving... an attenuated unity...'<sup>6</sup>

**I**t is this complex and often contradictory heritage that the forces of Hindutva today seek to wipe out from present-day realities and historical memory alike, in significant part through collapsing the narratives of the anti-colonial era into a simple story of monochromatic heroes and villains. The values and heroes of 'mainstream' nationalist historiography are significantly different, but a not-dissimilar fear of complexities often allows easy appropriations. Yet, surely much of the true greatness of the anti-colonial era resides precisely in its exceptional openness to debate and self-questioning: an openness manifested notably, in very different and quite often contradictory ways, above all by Gandhi, Nehru, Ambedkar and Tagore. Not many nationalist movements have had such a rich history of seeking to go beyond the limits of mere nationalism.

6. For some details of this transition, see my 'Indian Democracy: the historical inheritance', in Atul Kohli, ed., *The Success of Indian Democracy*, Cambridge, 2001.



# Nationalisms and the writing of environmental histories

K. SIVARAMAKRISHNAN

LAST autumn a delayed monsoon finally lashed North Indian states, causing floods in Bihar and landslides in Kashmir. Pilgrims and insurgents alike were stranded in the breached mountain roads that uncertainly traverse both the sacred and secular geography of the Indian nation. A vast bank of 'dirty' clouds hung over the subcontinent. Peering through this murk, scientists and policy analysts dredged up tired arguments about whom to blame. The usual suspects: paddy farmers, tropical shifting cultivators, woodcutters and pastoralists were in the sights of world environmentalists again.

Indian seasons are viewed more intently through a global prism than ever before. This, not least, because world climate historians have revived the study of linkages between ocean

currents, temperature, rainfall and food security, that had first captured the imagination of colonial governments in tropical Asia and Africa during the 19th century.<sup>1</sup> The World Conference on Sustainable Development in South Africa constituted another high profile venue for international scrutiny of India's environment. At this location India's ecological nationalism was again summoned to work.<sup>2</sup>

Nations gather, regularly now, in rituals of international confabulation that have come to characterize late 20th century managerial environmen-

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1. See Richard Grove, *Ecology, Climate and Empire: Colonialism and Global Environmental History, 1400-1940*, White Horse Press, Cambridge, 1997.

2. Ecological nationalism, in my usage, refers to a condition where both cosmopolitan and nativist versions of nature-devotion converge

talism. On the world stage nations redefine their mutual relations and responsibilities amidst heightened global insecurity. Simultaneously, the agenda of environmental history is also being rapidly rewritten. In the 1990s, as environmental studies permeated social science and humanities disciplines, the interdisciplinary rubric of political ecology became very influential for researchers in Europe and North America. A historical turn in the way problems were defined and research was conducted could be detected across the disciplines – notably anthropology, geography, sociology and political science – that embraced and refined the concepts and tools of political ecology.

**M**ore so than other fields of history writing, and most clearly in the Indian case, environmental history also brought together scholars in diverse traditions who discovered a shared anxiety and urgent concern for the degradation of forests, lands, water, wildlife habitats and air quality. They came to share a common mode of inquiry, environmental history, as they moved into the study of contemporary environmental problems.

The origins of Indian environmental history have already been persuasively traced to the critique of nationalized economic development that gathered momentum in the aftermath of Jayaprakash Narayan's 'total revolution' movement of the early 1970s.<sup>3</sup> Engagement with the nation state and international development policies was, thus, a key point of depar-

and express themselves as a form of national pride. In what follows I will elucidate how this form of nationalism has coloured the writing of history even as environmental history more generally has challenged other histories in their polemical moments.

3. See David Arnold and Ramachandra Guha, 'Introduction: Themes and Issues in the Environmental History of South Asia',

ture for Indian environmental history. In this respect, Indian environmental historians anticipated the more systematic incorporation of historical modes of inquiry and argument into environmental policy analysis in different parts of the world that were made objects of development.<sup>4</sup>

**S**tephen Dovers has, since, forcefully argued that environmental history must take as its central concern culpability and relevance – urgent policy issues. He says, 'crucially, relevance to sustainability demands a form of environmental history that goes well beyond tracing the history of traditional environmental protection and amenity concerns of pollution and nature conservation ... environmental history needs to have explanatory power regarding the roots of and reasons for such things as institutions, consumption patterns, economic activities, settlement arrangements, and scientific approaches relevant to particular environmental phenomena'.<sup>5</sup> To this diagnostic mandate we might add a prognostic agenda of specifying conditions for global and local coexistence and stewardship, made more immediate by the spread of war, calamity, disease and income disparities within and between nations.

pp. 1-20 in David Arnold and Ramachandra Guha (eds), *Nature, Culture, Imperialism: Essays on the Environmental History of South Asia*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1995, pp. 17-18.

4. The most striking instance of the use of environmental history to unsettle smug policy circuits is the work done by James Fairhead and Melissa Leach in *Misreading the African Landscape: Society and Ecology in a Forest-Savanna Mosaic*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1996; and *Reframing Deforestation: Global Analyses and Local Realities: Studies in West Africa*, Routledge, London, 1998.

5. Stephen R. Dovers, 'On the Contribution of Environmental History to Current Debate and Policy', *Environment and History* 6 (2000): 131-50, p. 138.

Expansive visions of what should comprise the subject of environmental history, such as the one sketched above, help us recognize the mutual imbrication of regional and world histories. The multi-scalar analyses that this recognition should prompt is already taking shape in Indian scholarship as it ranges from river basin studies to tank irrigation, vast biosphere reserves to community-based forest management, and poisoned wells to the pollution of major rivers and coastal fisheries. But sensitivity to scale and regional variation, recognition of heterogeneity and stochasticity, are insights and refinements won from hard, cumulative work and intense debate in the young but rapidly maturing field of environmental history in India.

Like most other histories written after colonialism, environmental history suffered initially from particular preoccupations. A brief detour into debates on writing history in the post-colonial moment will, therefore, be helpful here. Many issues are salient but this essay will only discuss the question of nationalisms and their relationship to trends and contestations within Indian environmental history.

**T**ension between continuity and rupture, mimesis and repudiation, lived hybridity and the quest for authenticity, is a central condition of postcolonialism. It has become the subject of much scholarly inquiry into colonialism and its consequences in India and other countries in Asia and Africa. Disciplinary divides have separated these inquiries into questions concerning institutions (including state formation) and identities (including subject formation). A fruitful synthesis emerges when both sets of questions jointly animate inquiry, and often it is in the realm of environmental his-

tory that a new materialism has interwoven with the study of ideas and representation in the examination of postcolonial predicaments.

Colonial hybridity was a product of confident policy assumptions that colonial subjects could be taught to mimic and imitate the authentic coloniser. These policies also presumed that there would be no danger of perfect assimilation because of ineradicable differences of race and evolution. But hybridity was also a weapon in the hands of colonized elites fighting for freedom and decolonization. They invoked the ideas of western societies not only to hold them true to their own beliefs, but also to claim a hybrid identity for the colonized that was a product of foreign and indigenous values.<sup>6</sup>

**T**he impact of these processes on the writing of history has been considered at length in the debate surrounding Subaltern Studies. Dipesh Chakrabarty notes that British rule was presented by colonial historians as an opportunity to introduce civilization. Rule of law, private enterprise and secular education were to create a modern economy, urban professions and civic consciousness. Several generations of Indian nationalists, well into the 20th century, participated in constructing the transition narrative where India needed to overcome immense barriers to enable movement from arbitrary to constitutional polities, feudal to capitalist economies, and traditional to modern societies. He concludes, 'most modern third-world histories are written within problematics posed by this transition narrative, of which the overriding (if implicit) themes are those of development, modernization and capitalism.'<sup>7</sup>

6. This summary is indebted to Ania Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*, Routledge, New York, 1998.

Arguably, environmental history emerged within the confines of these dominant perspectives. Both in its early intimations principally as a subtle undercurrent in agrarian history,<sup>8</sup> and in later self-confident, overt forms in forest and social movement history,<sup>9</sup> Indian scholarship on the environment was caught up in the critique of colonialism, the nation state, development and the transitions to capitalism that engrossed a wider nationalist and postcolonial historiography.

**I**n the hands of some practitioners of subaltern studies this has led to a critique of history itself as a modernist enterprise regulating collective memory and producing forms of sanctioned popular remembrance that favour the nation as the preferred mode of political solidarity. Most environmental historians have not been so ready to dismiss historical modes of knowing as hopelessly compromised.<sup>10</sup> As pointed out above, in fact, historical analysis has been crucial to the growth and diversification of environmental studies both in India and other third world locations even

7. Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History: Who Speaks for "Indian" Pasts?' pp. 263-93 in Ranajit Guha (ed), *A Subaltern Studies Reader, 1986-1995*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 2000, p. 267.

8. Elizabeth Whitcombe, *Agrarian Conditions in Northern India, I*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1972; David Ludden, *Peasant History in South India*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1985.

9. Ramachandra Guha, *The Unquiet Woods: Ecological Change and Peasant Resistance in the Himalaya*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1989; Amita Baviskar, *In the Belly of the River: Tribal Conflicts over Development in the Narmada Valley*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1995.

10. One work where environmental history is produced in a mode that questions 'History' is, exceptionally, Ajay Skaria, *Hybrid Histories: Forests, Frontiers, and Wildness in Western India*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1999.

as postcolonial historians have become anxious about history and the silences it enforces.

Critics of sweeping indictments of historical consciousness have argued that the poststructural turn in historical scholarship promotes a critique of essentialism in the writing of history from which it exempts itself. Also, by overestimating the power and reach of colonialism, the role of precolonial ideas and social formations in building colonial rule and sustaining or diminishing aspects of it is underestimated.<sup>11</sup> Most recently these exchanges have led to a call for histories of struggle, and histories of ambivalences, contradictions, ironies and tragedies, that are also part of the history of modernity.<sup>12</sup>

**I**ndian environmental history has participated in many of the twists and turns taken by this debate. It has also provided the lead occasionally in nudging discussions in more intellectually rewarding directions. An early preoccupation with colonialism as a watershed in environmental history has yielded to more nuanced analyses in studies from different parts of the country. These works show how the control of land, water, forests and wildlife varied across regions, and did not follow a clear developmental trajectory. Struggles over natural resources, we now know, reflected the opportunities and limitations created by a longer history of socioeco-

11. Sumit Sarkar, 'Orientalism Revisited: Saidian Frameworks in the Writing of Modern Indian History', pp. 239-55 in Vinayak Chaturvedi (ed), *Mapping Subaltern Studies and the Postcolonial*, Verso, London, 2000, p. 242.

12. Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2000; Gyanendra Pandey, *Remembering Partition: Violence, Nationalism, and History in India*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2001.

nomic change in which colonial interventions were but one, if influential, dimension.

**E**nvironmental historians led the charge on secular-metropolitan nationalism and its ecologically disastrous manifestations in large dams, forest policy, industrial pollution and nuclear proliferation. They were also instrumental in propagating a strategically essentialist, celebratory, indigenism (inspired equally by Gandhian ideas and romantic primitivism). This perspective has on occasion stimulated ethno-nationalism, regionalism, and forms of religious nationalism drawing upon the romanticized precolonial/premodern subject and society that they evoke in their writings.<sup>13</sup> The discussion of sacred groves among environmental historians illuminates the tension between competing metropolitan, indigenist and ecological nationalisms. Scholars manifest these struggles in the ways they choose to record how Indians lived in engagement over time with the physical environment, where the environment is considered as context, agent and influence in human history.

Colonial foresters, tribal rights activists, and ecological scientists are among a distinguished array of experts who have described sacred groves in India's forest history. In the words of a scientist, who in collaboration with an anthropologist has spent many years documenting these sacralized and, thus, protected landscapes in India, sacred groves are 'ancient nature sanctuaries where all forms of living creatures are afforded protection through the grace of some deity.'<sup>14</sup> In most instances the groves are associated with Hindu mother

goddesses, fierce deities who have preserved old growth and endemic biodiversity. By aligning the deities with religious cults predating agrarian sedentarism, this account claims forms of rural religiosity for a wider and antique nature devotion embedded in the Hindu pantheon.

**I**n contrast, a group of philosophers and religionists have dealt in greater detail with this question – to what extent do indigenous religious ideas have the potential to support ecological awareness in India? They provide a useful typology of Indian environmentalism by speaking of Brahminical models, tribal models, renouncer models and modern secular activism and rightly identify the inherent tension always present in Indian environmentalism between learning from western struggles and defining a distinctive Indian cultural practice.<sup>15</sup>

In a study specifically directed at discovering the shape, role and politics of sacred groves, Rich Freeman finds 'little correlation between the concerns and depictions of the modern environmentalist's models, and the actual local reasons for instituting and maintaining sacred groves.'<sup>16</sup> He goes on to demonstrate the fluidity of both society and its natural environment in the recent historical period, challenging thereby what he describes as 'neo-Hindu ecology'.<sup>17</sup>

Ecological nationalism, thus, refers to this kind of functionalist analysis of religiosity and conservation ethics. But it also refers to many

other late 20th century products of the dialectical working out of some of those meta-processes that we discussed earlier as inevitably the focus of modern history and colonial history. The chief among these is the commodification of nature.<sup>18</sup> A wide range of scholars, most notably Green Marxists, understood the relationship between modernity and the environment as one where people were increasingly separated from lived environments.

**I**n this account all aspects of that environment, including human labour and the body, became commodities circulating in a world economy driven largely by the emergence of capitalism in Europe and North America. Initially the commodification of land, forests and water was a central theme of environmental history and Indianists participated impressively in this literature. This trend, as scholars have shown, greatly facilitated national development as so-called natural commodities were harnessed to agendas of progress elaborated by the nation state. Green Revolution agriculture, production forestry, command area irrigation and multipurpose power

17. Freeman, 'Gods, Groves, and the Culture of Nature in Kerala', pp. 281-96. This revisionist work by religionists that shows up the indigenist nationalism of urban activists and scientists is gathering support from ongoing ecological research in South India on sacred groves. See Claude Garcia, 'What Sacred Groves Are Not', paper presented as part of the panel, 'Nature, Empire, and Nation in South Asia' at the Modern South Asia Conference, Heidelberg, 13 September 2002.

18. For lack of space I will no more than acknowledge here that much ink has been spilled on the question 'what is nature?' See, for an introduction to this discussion ranging across philosophy, environmental history, science and technology studies, cultural and literary studies, William Cronon (ed), *Uncommon Ground: Toward Reinventing Nature*, W.W. Norton, New York, 1995; and Bruce Braun and Noel Castree (eds), *Remaking Reality: Nature at the Millennium*, Routledge, London, 1998.

28 13. See various essays in Arun Agrawal and K. Sivaramakrishnan (eds), *Social Nature: Resources, Representations, and Rule in India*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 2001.

14. Madhav Gadgil, *Ecological Journeys: The Science and Politics of Conservation in India*, Permanent Black, New Delhi, 2001, p. 160.

15. Various essays in Lance Nelson (ed), *Purifying the Earthly Body of God: Religion and Ecology in Hindu India*, State University of New York Press, Albany, 1998.

16. J.R. Freeman, 'Gods, Groves, and the Culture of Nature in Kerala', *Modern Asian Studies* 33, 2 (1999): 257-302, p. 258.

generation, are some of the secular-metropolitan nationalist programmes that were enabled by the commodification of nature in India.

**W**hat I have already referred to as celebratory-indigenist nationalism is equally a product of these processes. Disaffection with the outcomes of national development and the rise of environmentalism coincided in the 1970s to unite urban radicals and rural leaders of tribal and peasant movements. Environmental NGOs, whose work coalesced in the immensely important Citizen's Reports on the Indian Environment<sup>19</sup> published in the early 1980s, contributed in good measure to this strand of nationalism. In their accounts plants, animals, water sources, and the poor people who subsisted on them and, thus, took care of them in traditional ways were all part of a national heritage. This heritage, they argued, was rich in customary knowledge, cultural diversity, ecological wealth, and forms of benign local government all of which was jeopardized by the standard and authoritarian formulae for environmental management offered by secular-metropolitan nationalism.

During the 1980s environmental activism and policy took Indian federalism simultaneously toward legal centralism and administrative devolution. Environmental historians were busy, from the late 1980s, explaining both impulses in terms of the complex legacy of colonialism and the national development imperatives of the first three decades of independence. In the 1990s the clash of these two kinds of ecological nationalism within India, and the rise of the international sustainable development net-

work of regulations and economic incentives, has generated a whole new set of concerns that are nationalist in character. Parks (for the conservation of endangered species), biodiversity protection and its associated concerns of endemism, intellectual property rights and the patenting of biogeographically unique plant materials, invasive species and genetically altered seeds are just a few of the issues where nature commodification and nationalism have intersected again in the last decade.<sup>20</sup>

These issues have given ecological nationalism new justification as strong national laws and policies are seen as possibly the only recourse in the face of international forces that would wrest culturally embedded knowledge, unique plant matter and quality entitlements in global commons like the atmosphere and oceans, from overpowered localities.

**S**cholars are only beginning to grapple with the research questions raised by the new ecological nationalism. But it is already clear that environmental history is being moved to greater, not lesser, interdisciplinarity as a consequence. Atmospheric sciences, information technology, international law, institutional economics, comparative religion and transnational cultural studies are just a few of the domains of expertise that environmental historians are moving into. They are acquiring methods from fields as diverse as physical sciences, linguistics and medicine to prosecute their studies. The impact of this ines-

capable interdisciplinarity on environmental historians is the discovery of new archival sources. In some cases otherwise well-used sources have yielded wonderful new insights because different questions were asked of them.<sup>21</sup>

**T**he skilful use of settlement reports, census documents and forest working plans in a series of Indian environmental histories produced in the 1990s, is a fine example of such new discoveries in old sources. The use of judicial records, obscure sporting and hunting serials, scientific and technical reports and private papers of individuals who were not of any consequence for other kinds of history illustrates the search for new sources.

More significantly, the methods of ecologists, anthropologists and geographers have entered history. A combination of field research and archival sources has come to be a distinctive characteristic of environmental history, and here social historians have also contributed in refining the collection of oral histories, ethnographic data and folklore for histories of everyday life. The history of science and technology and environmental history have fed each other's growth. It is fair to say, in the words of a review made in the context of American history, that 'in addition to opening up new areas of inquiry, environmental history provides a new way of seeing the terrain we think we already know well.'<sup>22</sup>

One of the important gains of environmental history has been its

19. Anil Agarwal, Sunita Narain, et al., *First and Second Citizen's Reports on the Indian Environment*, Centre for Science and Environment, New Delhi, 1982 & 1985, respectively.

20. In many of these novel environmental concerns nationalism is manifest as nativism or autochthony. Nature may become 'a fertile allegory for making people and objects strange, thus to forge critical new social and political distinctions.' Jean and John Comaroff, 'Naturing the Nation: Aliens, Apocalypse, and the Postcolonial State' in *HAGAR: International Social Science Review* 1, 1 (2000): 7-40, p. 8.

21. For similar findings in the African context, see the comprehensive review by William Beinart, 'African History and Environmental History', *African Affairs* 99 (2000): 269-302.

22. Adam Rome, 'What Really Matters in History: Environmental Perspectives on Modern America', *Environmental History* 7, 2 (2002): 303-18, p. 304.

rather bold delving into long duration studies.<sup>23</sup> Apart from pioneering the design of studies across the received boundaries of colonialism and independence, environmental scholars have also interrogated the dominant periodizations provided by other historians. Even within the confines of the colonial period we find that new and meaningful periodizations have emerged. For instance, the 1870s and 1880s are now recognized as key decades when the legal and administrative apparatus for land management rapidly expanded. The turn of the last century takes on new meaning as a period when scientific research in forestry, agriculture and tropical disease accelerated and expanded state development programmes for intensification of agrarian change, forest management and medicalization of the human body to cure and prevent tropical diseases.

But, to my mind, the most exciting trend arising from the maturation of environmental history is the renewal of efforts to combine forms of materialist and idealist analysis. From postmodern cultural theory to the new ecology and chaos theory, environmental historians are making innovative connections. These synthetic approaches defy epistemological divisions of an earlier period. Eclecticism has its dangers, of course, some of them are illustrated in the brief example of sacred groves discussed earlier. But surely the eclectic spirit is ultimately more curious than anything else, and so less susceptible to the congealed notions that hold more exclusive aspects of nationalisms together. Can we introduce this palpable curiosity into textbooks that cultivate nationalist sensibilities?

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30 23. Sumit Guha, *Ecology and Ethnicity in India, c. 1200-1991*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1999, remains the outstanding recent example.

# History and the domain of the popular

PARTHA CHATTERJEE

**NEW** ways of history writing? To answer that question, we need to consider what are the old ways of writing history that we have with us today. Have they served their purpose? Are they really antiquated?

Professional history writing by accredited members of the academy – that is to say, historians based in university history departments or in specialized research institutions – was established in India as the most reliable, authorized and ‘proper’ form of historical scholarship during the course of the 20th century. A full history of this process of the professionalization of history writing in India has not been written yet. But it appears to go hand in hand with the emergence, in the early decades of the 20th century, of a generation of university educated Indians who trained themselves in the modern methods of archival and archaeological research

developed in Europe and applied those methods to the study of Indian history.

They were keen to establish that their methods were scientific, and they aspired to a certain version of ‘positivist’ historiography, upholding the value of material artifacts, epigraphic and numismatic sources and archival documents over those of literary texts and popular memory. Their nationalist sentiments pushed them towards a narrative framework centred around the institutions of the state, whether for India as a whole or for each of the regions.

Thus, the periodization of Indian history tended to be based on dynastic reigns – Maurya period, Gupta period, Mughal period, or even for a region, Pala period, Sena period, Sultani period – rather than on other, let us say, economic or cultural institutions. Clearly, there was an urge to

establish a continuous history of India from ancient times in which social, economic and cultural developments could be framed by a history of the state.

**I**t was also in the course of the 20th century that the institutions for a professional community of historians were established. After independence, there was a huge expansion in higher education, almost entirely supported by state funding. Through institutions such as the University Grants Commission, the recruitment of teachers, curricula, textbooks, examinations etc. in the universities were brought under a single, and more or less common, pattern for the whole country.

In the sphere of historical research, bodies such as the Indian History Congress, the Indian Historical Records Commission and the Archaeological Survey of India, journals like the *Indian Economic and Social History Review* and *The Indian Historical Review* (in the period when it appeared regularly) and, more recently, *Studies in History*, and major publishing houses like Asia Publishing, Vikas (both now deceased), Oxford University Press, Sage, Manohar, Orient Longman, Munshiram Manoharlal or Motilal Banarasidas, succeeded in creating a domain where works of historical scholarship could be circulated, discussed and evaluated by professional historians. It is also worth mentioning that the recognized language of scholarship in this professional domain, established in the course of the 20th century, is English.

What did the new professional and scientific history replace? Before the emergence of academic historians in the universities in the early 20th century, the bulk of history writing in India consisted of what may be called the 'old social history'. These histories did not follow traditional modes

of retelling the past, although they may have borrowed certain narrative elements from them. They were not written in Sanskrit or Persian but mostly in the modern Indian languages. They were histories of religious sects, castes, kinship networks, regions, localities, languages, literature, art, music and so on. Often, they received their impetus from the official gazetteers and censuses of the 19th century. They aspired to mobilize arguments and deploy evidence in the same modern and rational forms that were approved by the colonial institutions of government and education. In this sense they were modern histories. But they were also deeply entangled in the ideological web of regional, sectarian, caste and ethnic politics of the 19th and 20th centuries.

**T**he scientific history of academic historians did not quite replace the old social history. Rather, it displaced it to a zone outside the authorized academy. The old social history did not die. It continued through the 20th century to produce histories – mostly in the Indian languages rather than in English – of the same social and cultural institutions as before: sects, castes, cults, lineages, ethnic groups etc. They were often deeply ideological and fiercely partisan histories, seeking to bolster the claims of one side or another in current political or cultural battles.

Academic historians hoped that their scientific histories, based on rigorously and professionally verified evidence, would undermine the ideologically driven claims of the rag-tag mass of old social histories. The new scientific history of the 1960s and 1970s chose to concentrate on economic activities and institutions. This was an area that was relatively less contaminated by the ideological germs of cultural politics. A rigorous history

of economic transactions and motivations was also seen as affording a way of cutting through the contentious claims of the hyper-ideological social histories and establishing a more scientific foundation of historical explanation in material life. Some of the most remarkable achievements by Indian academic historians in the 1960s and 1970s were in the field of economic history which enjoyed great intellectual prestige in history departments of the time.

**T**here is no doubt that the new academic history has achieved a great deal since the 1960s. It has consolidated a sphere of serious academic research with organized access to archives, libraries, journals, publishing houses, teaching programmes etc. It has also established for Indian history, historians and universities a recognized and respected place in the world of professional historical scholarship. The international connections are important because through the flow of students, researchers and publications, the professional practices of Indian historians have matched those prevailing in western academia. Historiographical innovations in other countries too have contributed to global debates on historical method.

A recent survey of two leading historical journals published in India and the booklists of four major Indian publishers shows that about one-third of articles and books on history published in India are authored by scholars located in foreign universities, mostly in North America, Europe and Australia.<sup>1</sup> There is no doubt that at the turn of the millennium, despite much internal wrangling and some vituperative attack by votaries of the Hindu

1. Partha Chatterjee (ed), *Social Science Research Capacity in South Asia*. Social Science Research Council, New York, 2002.



Right, the intellectual prestige of academic history writing in India is higher than it has ever been.

Yet this community of academic historians constitutes an enclave. The same survey I referred to above also showed that Indian historians published by the prestigious publishers and journals came from no more than half a dozen institutions in India, and of them the bulk were from a single city – Delhi. This reflects a set of deeply troubling facts about the unequal distribution of doctoral training programmes, access to libraries and archives, and openings into the world of academic publishing. Perhaps more significantly, it indicates the rather narrow limits of the influence of ‘high’ academic history on history writing in the country as a whole.

**A**s I said before, the rise of academic history did not obliterate the old social history. It only pushed it outside the domain of the high academy. But it has continued to flourish there – in the Indian regional languages, through books, pamphlets, magazines, newspaper columns, local learned societies, sectarian or community organizations, and political associations. It has often had vital links with cultural and political movements.

It would be wrong to think that the producers of these histories have no links with the academic world. They often do. In fact, their authority as writers on behalf of particular causes or campaigns often depends on their location in a college or university. They claim to follow the same procedures of evaluating and marshalling evidence as those taught in the universities. The crucial difference is that operating in a zone outside that policed by the professional institutions of high academic history, they have no need to submit their work to the assessment of journal referees and

peer-reviews. They seek their legitimacy in the domain of the popular.

**T**his, I think, is the crucial challenge facing academic history in India today – its relationship to the domain of the popular. The purist might protest and say, ‘Why must the academic researcher pander to the popular?’ Put this way, the objection is valid. The academic historian’s research agenda and methods should be set by the demands of the professional discipline, by other scholars working in the field. Surely, the mathematician or the physicist is never asked to relate his or her research to popular demands or tastes. Why should the historian have to think of the aspirations of social and cultural movements and what their propagandists are peddling in the name of history?

The matter, unfortunately, cannot be decided so easily in favour of the purist. First, despite the claims to being scientific, it is well-known that ideological presuppositions lurk under the methods adopted by all academic historiography. Second, if academic historians do constitute a social enclave, marked by specific associations of class, caste, region, language, etc., then their relationship to the popular does have an important bearing on the social legitimacy of their claims to historical truth. We know, for instance, from the researches of the late Pierre Bourdieu, how in societies with far greater social mobility than India, the members of the prestigious academic institutions still tend to come from a fairly narrow social strata. The situation is clearly more extreme when we consider the group that writes ‘high’ academic history in India.

Third, and crucially, if the promise of scientific history was to eradicate the ideological and often pernicious half-truths of the old social history, then academic history’s rela-

tionship to the popular is a test that it cannot, under any circumstances, avoid. Judging by the influence that academic history appears to have on the public domain in India today, it is a test that I fear we will fail.

I do not have any simple recipes for making academic history more sensitive to the popular. Certainly, the answer cannot be to turn academic history into some variant of the *Amar Chitra Katha*. Methodological rigour and intellectual discipline are the two pillars on which the superior claims of scientific history must rest; they cannot be given up without destroying the enterprise itself. I believe the answer must be found through a more rigorous search for an analytic of the popular.

**F**or too long, academic historians have neglected or overlooked the diverse forms of recounting the past that continue to shape beliefs, stereotypes and attitudes in the public sphere. In fact, they have seldom shown any interest in the ways in which the products of academic history themselves are appropriated in the many forms of popular historical narrative in fiction, cinema, theatre, painting and song. My hunch is that a huge part of these popular narratives in the 20th century have selectively fed on the material provided by academic historians. By looking aghast and turning away from what people have done to our carefully researched histories, we only reinforce our insularity. We might do better by studying those transformations more carefully. It would require more, not less, rigour to develop an adequate analytic of the popular.

There is a second recipe I have that is easy to describe but, I suspect, even more arduous to implement. A major reason for, as well as the obvious symptom of, the insularity of academic history in India is the language in which it is practiced – English. It is

not difficult to understand or appreciate why English must continue to be the language of historical research in India. But it is not clear why Indian historians could not *also* write in another Indian language.

There was a time in the 1970s when the Indian Council of Historical Research sponsored a gigantic project of translation of works on Indian history from English to the major Indian languages. I doubt very much that the translations had much impact. In fact, I am convinced that translations will never serve the purpose of reaching a readership outside the circle that today reads history in English. There is, first, the problem of the quality of translation. I know several translated books in Bengali that are incomprehensible unless you have already read the English original!

But, second, the quality issue hides an even more important reality. Academic history in English is written largely for other academic historians who inhabit the same professional institutions and share the same professional idioms. To reach outside that circle into the regions occupied by Indian language readers, academic historians must intervene in the field presently dominated by what I have called the old social history. Translated books will never accomplish this. Only original writing in the Indian languages can take up the challenge of fashioning a new conceptual language and idiom that might gain general currency in the Indian language public spheres. That would also mean opening up to, as well as confronting, the popular.

In short, there are good reasons to think that our current methods of writing academic history are not good enough. But to overcome those limits and wield greater influence over the public sphere, academic history needs both disciplinary innovation and more flexible but rigorous methods.

# Community sentiment and the teaching of history

RAJEEV BHARGAVA

HISTORIANS have long come to terms with the bogus absolutist claims of 'scientific' history. No one any longer contends that the teaching of history is free of choice and judgement of selection, omission and deletion. All historical knowledge is necessarily partial and incomplete. Our past goes further back than we can tell, is connected to the pasts of countless others and reveals itself variously from different vantage points never available simultaneously to us.

Besides, everything – persons, groups, practices, events or processes – has a past. Countless items in the world can become objects of historical knowledge. Therefore, historians *must* select and do so on the basis of their understanding of what is generally significant and deserving of cognitive attention. The writing of history is necessarily replete with absences and omissions.

This 'selection', already ingrained in history writing and research, is magnified when history is taught. First, there is the sheer volume of available historical texts to contend with: plainly, teachers have too much history to teach and students far too much to learn! Anyhow, skills imparted to school children, even in the teaching of history, are different from those learnt and perfected by students of academic history. School teaching of history is one component of a more general educational programme; part pedagogy and history

only in part. If so, school 'history' can never be identical to the academic discipline called 'history'. What it takes from academic history quite simply has to be selective.

For these and many other related reasons, it is not selection, omission or deletion as such that are at issue or are objectionable. What is really at stake is whether these are done on justifiable grounds. It is keeping this in mind that we ask: is the decision of the NCERT to remove sections it deems objectionable justified? Can a particular section of a school textbook be deleted on the sole ground that it hurts the sentiment of any community?

To answer this, I identify at least three assumptions that underlie this decision. First, that the communal identity of persons is the only one they have. Second, that sentiments are naturally given, unalterable and cannot be morally evaluated. Third, that respecting a person or community always implies overlooking defects, refraining from being critical. Since each of these assumptions can be challenged, the decision of the NCERT is unwarranted.

British colonial writing never conceived India as a nation but instead saw it as an ad hoc conglomeration of several discrete communities. In addition, these communities were seen not as rational agents but only as subjects of feelings. Individuals, on this view, saw themselves solely as members of sentimental communi-

ties, with no reflective powers to distance themselves from their community or be able to challenge practices they found unbearable. The NCERT replicates this Orientalist view and simply grafts it on to modern India today. It thereby perpetuates a deeply offensive picture of India self-consciously and painstakingly fought against by the movement for independence.

**M**ore importantly, this picture is plainly wrong. I doubt that a society has ever existed in which all its members defined themselves exclusively in terms of the community to which they were attached. Almost always, at least some people in society possess the capacity to reflectively endorse or challenge the practices of their community. This was true too of India in the 18th and 19th century.

Could our great social reformers such as Gandhi or Phule have achieved anything if they had always worried about the sentiments of religious communities? Could improvements in the life of religious communities have been possible if religious reformers such as Guru Nanak, Dayanand or Vivekanand looked over their shoulders to see how their actions distressed the feelings of orthodox religious leadership?

The decision makers at the NCERT may respond to this by saying that they are not making mutually exclusive claims. Individuals can belong to a particular community and yet see themselves independent of it. Individuals can be simultaneously rational and emotional. The point, they might say, is that even rational individuals have feelings. Though mostly rational, Hindus have sentiments too which are hurt when told that their ancestors ate beef. So do Sikhs when they read that Guru Teg Bahadur indulged in plunder.

This is all very well, but embedded in the NCERT response are three further assumptions. First, that emotions, quite like sensations, are biological perturbations that occur within us, not collectively generated entities for which we are responsible. Second, once triggered off, there is no easy way to control them. All counter strategies to deal with powerful emotions are therefore impotent. Even the persuasive powers of reason are annulled when faced with strong feelings. An emotion is like pain; it cannot be expunged by rational talk. Third, what is beyond our control is also outside the ambit of rational or moral evaluation. If we, conscious agents, are mere receptors of feelings that just happen to us and that spring from sources outside reason, then they can neither be rational nor irrational, neither be good nor bad.

**D**oes it make sense to say that our inability to fly is irrational or that our mortality is immoral? Is it immoral for me to have a tooth ache? We may regret that we are finite creatures, but surely we cannot say that there is something wrong about it. These are just plain facts about us, beyond reason, beyond good and evil. It is the same with feelings. We cannot rationally assess or morally evaluate them. Because they overwhelm us, we are entirely passive in relation to them. It is best then to give in to emotions and bow before the much stronger sentiment of collectivities.

This conclusion is false because the assumptions from which it flows are mistaken. Most human emotions are socially constructed. We are not biologically programmed to be indignant about injustice. Many feelings, such as shame and guilt, are culturally specific. Almost all emotions are amenable to rational assessment. If someone says that he had a pang of regret,

it is perfectly legitimate to ask if he was justified in having it. If someone is angry, it is entirely appropriate to ask if that anger is reasonable.

**T**his is so because like beliefs and unlike sensations, emotions have an intentional content. They are always about something. As with any mental entity with a content, it is always legitimate to ask if emotions fit or cohere with the world. Emotions, like beliefs, can be shown to be false or unreasonable.

Take an example. Suppose that I am angry because I believe that my low grades are due to a deep bias against my caste. If, on closer examination, a bias shows up in the pattern of marking, for instance, if other members of the same caste have secured poor marks, then my anger seems to be justified. If not, then it is unfounded. Surely, others can reasonably expect me to shed my anger and to accept my just desserts. Emotions can change by rational persuasion.

Just as emotions are rational or irrational, they can be moral or immoral too. It is not exactly moral to feel bad about the legitimate success of others. It is certainly morally wrong to gloat at the misery of others. We discourage children from being jealous or envious because such emotions harm them as well as others. Emotions then are not mere eruptions that are independent of our beliefs, judgements and appraisals. It is legitimate to ask if resentment is rationally endorsed and morally justified. If not, even though difficult, it is best to drop it.

However, those who favour these deletions may reply that Hindus and Sikhs have good reason to be offended, that their resentment is morally justified because these statements are unambiguously false. And who will decide the truth and falsity of these statements? The community,

of course, they would answer, and Truth is what the community says it is. This relativist position is plainly unconvincing. Though there are no absolute, final, unrevisable truths, it is humanly possible to arrive at beliefs which, given available information, it is most reasonable to hold. This is so in social science and history as much as in natural science.

**T**he cognitive content of feelings of hurt and resentment must then be assessed by procedures of sound and valid arguments and broadly acceptable standards among historians by which good from bad interpretations of available historical evidence can be distinguished. If so, what is included or jettisoned from history textbooks must be decided by or be consistent with the judgements of professional historians.

Has the NCERT consulted relevant historians? If the moral legitimacy of sentiments depends, as far as is reasonably possible, on the best available interpretation of evidence, the validity of arguments and on the plausibility of historical accounts, then the judgement of historians is relevant to whether or not feelings of hurt and resentment are justified.

The NCERT can furnish a further, desperate argument: some statements, even if true, must be removed if they offend the self-esteem of any community. Is it not the case that sometimes truth hurts, lowers self-respect or our respect for others? Will our respect for a person not be diminished when we hear something true but disagreeable, distasteful or nasty about him? Not necessarily. We do not lose respect for parents or friends even when we recognise their failings. This, primarily because we also know of their strengths and virtues that far outweigh their known faults.

Respect is consistent with criticism and with a recognition of some

defects in character. So is love. Criticism, however, is incompatible with blind submission, subordination and deference. The acknowledgement that our ancestors did something of which we now disapprove does not necessarily diminish our respect for them. We lose respect only when nothing worthwhile at all is found in their way of life.

Similarly, disrespect towards religious communities is shown when an entire way of life is condemned, not when a few of their practices are criticized. To my knowledge, history textbooks from which selected portions are deleted do not condemn the way of life of any community and show no disrespect for religion. They do, however, discourage a deferential attitude. Because good critical education is incompatible with deference, this, indeed, is how it should be.

**I** have taken the claims of NCERT seriously and at face value as sincere and reasonable. But given the overall context in which they are made, one suspects that beneath the assumptions of such claims, deeper, more sinister conceptions of politics, education and history are at play – that politics is all about the deployment of brute power and the non-consensual enforcement of a set of preferences, that education, a somewhat less coercive element within this agenda, enables strait jacketed socialisation of children into these preferences, and that history, an even smaller component of this education, is pure fiction justifiably conjured up by shrewd tacticians out of prejudice, rumours, half-truths and lies.

This is not the place to challenge all these conceptions, but it is not out of place to reiterate once more what all good historians and educationists already know, that history is taught to open the minds of school children not to politicise or socialise them.

# Archaeological evidence as legal testimony

M.S. GANESH, RABINDRA K. HAZARI and  
SHEREEN RATNAGAR

AMONG the places of worship that certain political parties wish to 'reclaim for Hindus' is the site of the now demolished mosque at Ayodhya. A combination of circumstances prompted some archaeologists to announce to the public that they had 'proof' of the existence of a medieval Ram temple preceding the construction of the mosque by Mir Baqi. The High Court of Allahabad is currently hearing a case that will decide, among other things, whether this archaeological claim is true, and whether Hindus have been worshipping at this very spot as the birthplace of the deified Ram 'since time immemorial'. The dispute is over the religious character the site has possessed over the centu-

ries. The matter assumes a particular degree of piquancy as no one knows what actually lies under the mosque.

As one of the aims of this collection of papers is to distinguish the present political efforts to rewrite history from historical practice within the social sciences, we set out to ask, in this paper, in what manner the distinction emerges when a controversy is debated before the judiciary. We need also to write about court deposition as a learning experience for scholars who see themselves as mainstream liberals.

If an individual were, in the public interest, to go to court to plead, say, that a particular site had certain features that merit its inclusion in the list

of protected monuments, that court might declare its lack of competence in this sphere and direct the petitioner to the concerned state authority. But when there is a dispute over a place with contested religious claims, and it is your word against mine, the court has no choice but to hear both sides. (We hasten to point out here that the High Court has not been called to decide where Ram was born.)

The resolution of a controversy in the court is founded on the burden of proof. The burden of proof in any suit lies on that person who makes an assertion as to a fact—on the party who would fail should no evidence at all be given on either side. In this instance, the burden of proof lies with those who assert that there was a temple under the mosque and thereby claim the right to build a temple on the site.

**N**ot everything needs to be proved to a court—not, for instance, the laws in force, geographical divisions, seals authorized by law, etc. But for the rest, a court resorts to appropriate books or documents of reference. It may refuse to take judicial notice of any fact cited by a litigant unless and until such books or documents are produced. Opinion witnesses are thus called in. At the outset their credentials are spelt out to establish the value of their testimony as specialists in the concerned field. All facts that either support or are inconsistent with the opinions of the experts are relevant. The scholarly assessment of such facts by experts is heard out, but it is the court, the non-expert, who will adjudicate on the issue, on what had once been a set of internal or intra-disciplinary issues.

Once adjudication occurs and findings of fact are recorded, the 'true factual position' is taken out of the hands of the scholars concerned. History stands 'rewritten' by the court, under the sanction of law.<sup>1</sup> Until such

a court decision is reversed or neutralized by a superior court, or revised at a time when another suit comes up, this 'history' is final. Scholars may only comment on the decision. They cannot contest history as settled by the court.

With such an intriguing outcome ahead, where does the specialist (in this case the archaeologist<sup>2</sup>) find him/herself placed? Bits and pieces of material from a dig here or a scratching of the soil there, flaunted in seminars and popular writing as 'proof', fail to count in court if it transpires that the circumstances of recovery (say, the digging was unauthorized) are suspect. However, technicalities are not the only points of interest, and even the scholar who sees him/herself as being true to the discipline, experiences a process of self-discovery. A new consciousness emerges of the strengths and weaknesses of routine procedures of academic argument that are otherwise taken for granted.

**M**ost academics learn, over the years, how to counter uncomfortable questions or challenges to their interpretations. But when the debate moves out of the orbit of scholarly journals, seminar rooms and the media, they cannot take the audience for granted, or assume that the starting assumptions are known to all concerned. They are speaking neither to like-minded persons ('our gang', gathered here to cheer rather than to criticise), nor to an adversary in a television studio, nor to a lot of young, uninformed minds at a university, from the superior position

of their academic rank. Instead, the debate has moved into the hearing of informed and critical, though non-specialist, legal minds whose academic status, assumed or bestowed by the peer group or by society, is besides the point. It is the nature of the evidence produced before the court, the internal logic, and the validity of arguments that count.

**I**n contrast to an academic conference, a court of law adjudicates a dispute so that expert witnesses face a novel, adversarial situation, war by other means. While no university seminar or workshop would presume to establish a conclusion to an existing debate, or to decide who 'wins' or who 'loses', court decisions are indeed conclusive and there are only limited grounds for appeal against them. And thus the rules of argumentation are different. Your rights and liabilities are the concern of the court. Experienced lecturers may go unprepared to a class or meeting and speak extempore to an audience whose questions can be sidestepped or overridden, but in court one is compelled to answer each question fully (and truthfully) without prevarication, on oath.

It is a salutary lesson to be debarred the luxury of countering a (hostile) question with another question, an old trick of the seminar circuit and conference routine. Further, precision of language becomes important as never before. Imagine the reaction of a court if one were to pronounce that a shopping centre is a 'space that combines hegemony with harmony and simultaneously displays the positioning of women as objects of knowledge!' Professional jargon about sections, foundation trenches, etc. has to be correctly and concisely defined, on demand. And you cannot get away with informing the non-specialist that if he does not understand your jargon,

1. It is, of course, possible that the court may conclude that nothing decisive can emerge from the contrasting and contradictory testimonies recorded. It may thereby dismiss the suit.

2. The argument about a temple having been demolished to make place for the mosque, and the argument that there is no such evidence, are both essentially archaeological in nature.

the problem lies with him.<sup>3</sup> What is more, there is no room for the extended analogies or anecdotes that teachers use with great effect in their lectures as explanatory and discursive devices. In court, brevity is the soul not only of wit but of prudence.

**H**owever learned an expert witness, it is the knowledge, reputation, and skills of his advocate that matter. A witness will ordinarily present his case not in his own way, but one mediated by a trial lawyer, who will decide what aspects shall be highlighted and how, and what needs to be relegated to the background in the building up of a case. The lawyer's is invariably the last word on the content of the deposition, not least because every word of it will be rigorously scrutinized by opposing counsel during cross-examination. The trial lawyer is a 'translator' who imbibes the wisdom of one discipline and transposes it into the language of another. If an archaeologist should fail to understand this, (s)he pays for it in the witness box. It is the trial lawyer who develops the skill of not only assimilating the material of a discipline like history, but gauging its import.

To be effective, trial lawyers need to know the work and professional backgrounds of the witnesses and to assess whether they have the authority to speak on a particular point. They need to be familiar with a field so as not to be swayed or intimidated by its jargon, and to instantly recognize inconsistencies in argument. Further, they need to be able to assess the reliability of the evidence cited, and also be aware of changing views and approaches in a particular discipline.

For their part, scholars work in a social milieu. They interact in various personal ways with their colleagues. Friendship, departmental affiliation and political conviction colour these interactions. In a book review one may refrain from challenging a senior scholar; or, because of friendship, avoid pointing out an error across the conference table. A professor may advise a student that he is not certain about a particular matter, but that, if Dr. X has dated a feature so, the student may accept that dating for the time being. Yet, it is quite another matter to announce, as a court witness, that if Dr. X has said something, it must be correct—that is tantamount to stating, 'Y is correct because X said so.' Outside the academic circuit, then, unthinking and spontaneous loyalties carry the risk of projecting a disagreement over evidence and mode of reasoning to the level of two 'camps' pitted against each other. The bottom line is that certain findings of others may be accepted as working hypotheses, but scholars do have the responsibility of either going into such matters themselves, or distinguishing clearly between their own findings and those (of others) that are taken on trust. The finer points of intellectual integrity thus unwittingly get exposed in court.

**W**hen a scholar writes or reads a paper for the peer group, the parameters are defined. The academic value of the paper, in fact, depends largely on how a problem has been constructed or structured. But in the courtroom the parameters are set by others. The scholar often has to do some quick adjustment to an unfamiliar—sometimes incomprehensible—frame of reference. In the process, emphasis on a kind of positivism comes to the fore, so that the 'primacy of primary sources' takes pride of place. Let us consider how.

**T**he reinterpretation of material and the application of newly constructed theories to known material, are acceptable practices. In fact, dozens of history and archaeology books cast in this mould are considered milestones in their disciplines. But when we need to win friends and influence the organizers of the next international conference, it may be inappropriate to ask a learned professor if he had read his Puranic sources on a deity in the original, or if he could explain the context in which a particular Sangam poem makes reference to sailing boats. Archaeologists avoid asking colleagues whether they have themselves drawn the sections of their sites. And no archaeologist visiting the excavations of a colleague would be so tactless as to drop a pebble down the side of a trench to check whether the section is vertical, much less go and sieve the dumps! And so, scholars do get away with conclusions that they have no right to make.

Contrast this with a court procedure in which a witness emphasizes the importance of a newly-discovered inscription, and makes categorical statements about its evidential value. If it turns out (on questioning under oath) that (s)he has never made a sustained study of palaeography or Sanskrit, and is not academically qualified to interpret the inscription, the outcome may only be acute discomfiture.

Yet, in this context there is another kind of problem. The primacy of first-hand acquaintance with a site or trench may be repeatedly argued, to imply that the only reliable testimony comes from 'those who were there' and excavated that particular site. It is admittedly a handicap not to have worked in a trench or seen a mosque for yourself. But there are ways and ways of 'seeing for yourself'. Can a witness recall the location or dimensions of certain features? Did (s)he



observe a certain detail? If not, of what use is that first-hand testimony?

**S**econd, surely no excavator of a site is granted the privilege of being the sole arbiter of its interpretation. If we were to push that logic too far, we would have to make the absurd statement that Professor X has no right to publish a book on the megaliths of the southern Deccan, because he himself has dug no more than a dozen of them (they exist by the thousand). Third, in the history of Indian archaeology, some of the most stimulating work has been polemical in nature. It includes a radical critique of the Archaeological Survey's published results of field work in Kathiawad in the 1960s and the questioning of the published chronology of Kausambi (a key iron age site near Allahabad) on the basis of a re-analysis of the published section and stratigraphy, both critiques by scholars who themselves never did the original exploration, excavation, or section interpretation.

The assumed superiority of the views of 'one who was there' need not stand for long in court. We cannot take positivist logic to extremes. After all, field archaeologists the world over know that site directors are often absent from their excavations at the time when crucial finds have been unearthed,<sup>4</sup> and thus have not seen their stratigraphic context for themselves. (In archaeology, the latter—house floor or pit, for instance—comprises a critical component of the data.)

By the same token, if an archaeologist went to a site days after an accidental discovery was made there, it is as good as not having 'been there'—because the context has been lost.

4. The Archaeological Survey of India has found it necessary to include a clause, in its permits for excavation, specifying the maximum period a field director can spend away from his site while excavation is going on.

There is no professional to vouch for the precise find spot, only hearsay. It then follows that in court it is only universally established procedures of data recovery and data recording—basic issues, unfortunately often neglected in peer-group discussions—that stand up to questioning. This can force a welcome degree of awareness on one deposing in court.

Material that is recovered by methods that subvert the basic principles of data recovery, principles that apply wherever archaeology is practised, does not count as evidence. Further, in the social sciences we adhere to the proposition that nothing is ever proved by us with finality, because we cannot replicate past situations by experiment. Yet social scientists also hold that any hypothesis can be refuted by exposing its internal inconsistencies or its methodological and evidential inadequacies, or else when new finds come up that point to other conclusions. Thus chance finds can say only so much, as all serious students of archaeology will acknowledge.

**O**bviously, having to testify in a court would be bad news for post-modernists in the habit of rushing to agree with their critics when things get hot for them at conferences. All academics have at one time or other preached to their students about changing historical paradigms and shifts in starting assumptions, but it may be difficult to convince a court that both their own statement and a contesting statement by the opposing party are true. While doubt, probability, and reasonable inference are the obligatory ingredients of social science reasoning, we need, in Andre Beteille's words, 'a disciplined as against a self-indulgent attitude towards facts.' Essential as it is to point out that the Critical Edition of the *Ramayana*

cannot be regarded as the urtext, it requires conviction and confidence to insist that a trench section can be drawn and read in only one way and that stratigraphic sequences do not admit of multiple views.

**P**olitically motivated interpretations are always literalist. Its practitioners are uncomfortable with concepts, abstractions and theory. They argue that an adversary may have substantial excavation experience, but none in 'northern India', and hence cannot be a reliable witness on the stratigraphy of a site in the Gangetic belt. They do not think in terms of methodology, leave alone universal methodological principles. Surely the methodology underlying archaeological data recovery is neither geographically circumscribed nor culturally embedded!

Again, it is a literal approach that holds that the place where a particular ruler's inscription has been found can be no other than one where that ruler organized construction activity—literal, because no question is asked about other reasons why that inscription could have been left or placed there in the past. It is like arguing, 'the book lies on this table; the book is mine; therefore this table is mine.' The legal process, instead, stresses the importance of 'chains' and 'links' between disparate pieces of circumstantial evidence.

Aside from vulgarizing the concept of proof, reactionary projects also resort to wholesale disregard of academic traditions (such as historical linguistics in the case of the Aryan problem) and wishing away of treatises that refute their theories. At academic conferences, speakers with greater influence tend to receive a closer hearing than others do. But the legal system is a levelling one. Imbued as court proceedings are with solemn-

nity, discipline and a certain etiquette, courts, in their attempts to give equal opportunity to both sides, can be those institutions in which positions inconvenient to those in power can be expounded.

We suggest that the biggest casualty of the court experience is the propensity of the mystifiers, revisers, and repressors of the truth to assume the ignorance of non-specialists and to believe that they can thereby get away with fabrications. It has become a habit for a few with lung power and political patrons in the highest quarters to cut corners and to dumb down. Sweeping claims about the discovery of 'incontrovertible proof' have been endlessly repeated, almost as a habit. To those ensconced in authoritarian situations it must come as a shock to find their categorical statements being questioned down the line in court.

As for mainstream practitioners, we hope that university departments raise an awareness amongst students about the misuse of the concept of proof, and the dangers of taking refuge in an assumed mystique. It would not do any harm to the cause of professional history/archaeology for academics to laugh at the tricks of their trade. And we can press afresh for a genuinely liberal spirit—starting with self-censorship on what people see as 'cronyism' and a greater openness to criticism—in academia.

Once an academic controversy is taken through the portals of a court, it stands withdrawn from the perimeters and constructs of the concerned academic disciplines and is placed squarely in the domain of law for its resolution. In that event, evidentiary proof of facts comes to be differently construed. Experts may think they have the last word, but it is the court that will sift the documentary evidence as well as the expert opinions. Thus it is really the court that has the last word on the last word.

# Hindutva and its 'mhystory'

PRADIP KUMAR DATTA

THE relationship between Hindutva and history has generated intense debate among anti-communalists for over a decade now. The ball was set rolling by a booklet issued by the Centre for Historical Studies, JNU in 1989 entitled 'The Political Abuses of History: Babri Masjid/Ramjanmabhumi Dispute'. It carefully marshalled evidence to question the Hindutva claim that Ram was an actual individual who had been born where the Babri Masjid stood.

Interestingly, the pamphlet provoked much criticism from anti-communalists who were also anti-secularist, including scholars such as Veena Das and Ashis Nandy. They thought that to contest Hindutva claims on the basis of evidence not only missed Hindutva's point that it was a matter of belief, but worse, that secularists collaborated with the basic assumptions of Hindutva using the criteria that facts involved devaluation, indeed suppression, of local beliefs and myths in favour of homogenized worldviews that the state normally propagated.

In a stimulating article where the animus against secular historians outweighs objections against Hindutva, Ashis Nandy claims that the former seek to colonise conceptions of the past by trying to know it in its comprehensive factuality (as opposed to myth which only remembers the moral stories about the past) and suggests

a complicity with Hindutva ideologues who, according to him, only object to secular history for not being 'adequately scientific'.<sup>1</sup>

Unfortunately Nandy's understanding of Hindutva's history bears the marks of casual polemic. It seems to me that this is not just a problem with the essay, but with the nature of the debate itself which has been framed around the evils of secularism or history (most often both) and the virtues of myth and memory, and vice versa. The consequence of the intense exchanges between anti-communalists is that Hindutva's history tends to simply provide the occasion for the debate and is itself left largely unspecified. A part of the problem is that Hindutva ideologues have only now begun to specify their principles of history, faced as they are with public condemnation of their suppression of school textbooks and volumes of the ICHR project on the nationalist movement entitled 'Towards Freedom'.

One such cogent definition of Hindutva history has come from K.R. Malkani, a leading Hindutva ideologue, who advocates a synthetic principle. Replying to the charge that the HRD ministry is promoting myths in the name of history, Malkani declares, 'The fact is that there is often more history in myths and more myth in history.'<sup>2</sup> The interpenetrating notion of myth and history requires a new term to indicate its novel particularity. The one I will use here is 'mhistory'.

A form of knowledge which combines such disparate methods

can possess few internal principles of its own that would give it coherence. Indeed, its principles are derived from an external and transcendental source which is that of nationalism. Malkani states in his triumphalist conclusion that a 'good history' is one that can produce a 'healthy nation', while critical historians are guilty of 'self-abuse'. The past is simply a resource to build a positive (the opposite of self-abuse) self-image for Hindus. This involves two elements. The first is that the hypothetical nature of historical evidence is replaced by assertions. In his definitive work on Hindu nationalism, Golwalkar says clearly that the 'tentative value' of hypotheses regarding the Aryan invasion theory must be rejected by the certitude that 'we Hindus came into the land from nowhere, but are indigenous children of the soil... from time immemorial.'<sup>3</sup>

The second and complementary element is that of willed forgetting. Any detail that disturbs the positive self-image of Hindus must be jettisoned. Malkani concedes that some people may have eaten beef in ancient India and low castes always have, but asserts that its mention in textbooks is an act of 'ridiculing Indian regard for the cow.'

In its mixture of fact and fiction with the latter as the dominant genre (which, as Malkani's example about beef indicates, the need for certitudes would logically require), in the subordination of the past to the authority of present beliefs and the modern idea of conscious forgetting that myth-making needs in order to repress the variety and often contradictory welter of details, Hindutva is clearly intimate with the structures of myth. Except for the presence of two important elements.

The first is that it does not subscribe to the culture of myths. Myths require a culture which allows them to offer different meanings to separate communities; a capacious narrative structure that permits key narrative points and motifs to be changed and reorientations made. It is to such a culture that the Ramayan belongs by virtue of the diverse versions it has spawned (as shown in Paula Richman's book *Many Ramayans*). Hindutva's intolerance for this culture has been firmly demonstrated by their storming of the Sahmat exhibition 'Hum Sab Ayodhya' and of M.F. Husain's pictorial interpretation of Saraswati. The other feature that militates against Hindutva's commitment to myth is its valorisation of facts.

Hindutva's attachment to facticity is apparent in Malkani's rhetoric and in its animosity to the work of secular historians; also in attempts such as the one recently made that used computer simulation technology to virtualise Harappan seals and pass it off as evidence of a continuity between the Indus Valley and Vedic civilizations. The most important among these attempts at conjuring up facts is the Ramjanmabhumi agitation itself, which is to make a belief in the past, i.e. that Ram existed and was born in Ayodhya, materialize into a tangible and actual fact by building a temple at a specific spot.

This enterprise can have sophisticated versions. For instance Golwalkar (notwithstanding his rejection of hypotheses in a later context) cites unnamed Orientalist scholars to say that the Bhagavadgita was composed 1500-2000 years before Buddha who lived in 600 B.C. This means that the Mahabharat was composed 4500-5000 years ago. Since the Bhagavadgita reveals a highly developed and complex civilization which must have

1. Ashis Nandy, 'History's Forgotten Doubles', *History and Theory*, No. 34, 1995. See also my criticisms of Veena Das in *Carving Blocs: Communal Ideology in Twentieth Century Bengal*, Delhi, 1999.

2. K.R. Malkani, 'History and Nationalism', *The Statesman*, 23 December 2001.

3. M.S. Golwalkar, *We or our Nationhood Defined*, Nagpur, 1945; first published 1939, p. 12.

taken centuries to evolve (he refers to 2000 years that Christianity has taken to achieve its present level of civilization which is still incomparably lower than that of the 'superb social structure sung in that immortal song'), it follows that Hindus have been in 'undisturbed possession' of this land for 8000-10,000 years.<sup>4</sup>

**G**olwalkar bombards the reader with a wide range of methods with diverse assumptions—the equation of the normative with the actual in the way he looks at the Gita, the cross references to scholars, the comparisons with other civilizations—all of which are in turn used to make a step by step deduction of dates that finally snowballs into a grand and fantastic assertion. The deductive process has no internal coherence and is not meant to have, for its real purpose is rhetorical, which is to persuade the reader that the hoariness of the past is being actually established.

Admittedly these are fascinating improvisations that reveal how mythic structures can be opportunistically made to draw upon and include apparently verifiable evidence. Nevertheless what is more interesting is the extent of Hindutva's dependence on facts to produce plausibility for itself and others,<sup>5</sup> despite their commitment to 'sentiment' and belief. The roots of this may lie in the defensive strategy begun in the 19th century to prove India had an actual and glorious history by interpreting narrative metaphors of the epics and puranas as revealing the ability of Indians to fly, make nuclear weaponry and soon.

4. Ibid, p. 10.

5. See for instance Koenrad Elst's painstaking criticism of the factual basis of the JNU booklet in his *Ram Janmabhoomi vs Babri Masjid: a case study in Hindu Muslim conflict*. New Delhi, 1990.

But Hindutva's project has outgrown that discourse. It uses facts to tap the plausibility that is often given by popular common sense to historians: that they tell the stable, actual truth about how things really were in the past. Historical facts are often seen—and this is borne out by numbers of popular histories and textbooks—as being unproblematically equal to reality itself. Clearly, for Hindutva, facts are very important for it reinforces the belief that the past was actually glorious and that Hindus today have a continuous connection with it. There is also another, connected reason for stressing the importance of historical facts and that has to do with the desire for actualizing it in the present. I will deal with this in the next section.

**T**he case of mhistory suggests that mythic structures, once isolated and homogenized, are more amenable to instrumentalisation because they are signs of belief and can therefore be controlled by it. They also possess a flexibility that can confidently mobilise historical details and the assumptions of actuality they carry with them. This flexibility is crucial for Hindutva for it is engaged in a larger project of producing a Hindu national identity that needs to deploy the past in the present.

Hindutva's project can be fruitfully understood by situating it against the insights of Charles Taylor who, in a pathbreaking article, defined the politics of identity as based on the need for recognition. A community, like a person, needs to be recognized as possessing merit and value by those outside it. Denial of this recognition, inferiorisation of the community by others damages and may even distort its self.<sup>6</sup>

It is not my purpose here to recount the rich line of Taylor's argu-

ment, but I wish to use this fundamental insight of Taylor to define the utterly contrary project of Hindutva. Taylor's model valorizes the others' recognition and seeks to redress inequities in the relationship between the self and the other. Hindutva, on the other hand, is committed to the project of self-recognition. It is interested in how Hindus regard themselves rather than how they are looked at by others. Together with this is a privileging of the self in relationship to others. Following from this it is interested in producing unequal relationships with others rather than removing them.

**F**or Hindutva the self is the Hindu nation. There are no divisions or contradictions in this self nor is there any space in it for the idea of the individual or interior self. The reiterations of 'common' in the following citation from Golwalkar where he defines the Hindu nation in terms of race is an index of the impossibly compact degree of homogenization that it demands: 'Living in this country since prehistoric times is the ancient Race—the Hindu Race, united together by common traditions, by memories of common glory and disaster, by similar historical, political, social, religious and other experiences, living under the same influences, and evolving a common culture...' <sup>7</sup> and so on. This is a self that is present in the culture of the country, it does not need to be created or joined together. Instead it needs to be recognized by the bearers of the self, setting in motion a process that will make the country realise its essentially Hindu character.

This process of recognition is referred to as 'jagaran' or 'jagrup',

6. Charles Taylor, 'The Politics of Recognition', in Amy Gutman (ed.), *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, New Jersey, 1994.

7. op cit., Golwalkar, p. 45.

words that indicate the idea of awakening that is associated with a resumption of potency. Pride is crucial to this awakening, for it is the loss of pride in ones Hinduness as a consequence of Muslim and British invasions, especially colonial indoctrination (resulting in secularism of course!) that has obscured the self from the recognition that they possess the land. Golwalkar declares that Hindus must realize that they are the 'indigenous children of the soil [and hence] natural masters of the country'.<sup>8</sup> The process of self-recognition for Hindutva involves a sense of mastery over the space of the country itself.

**A**s may be inferred, Hindutva's self-recognition is not a gentle process of spreading beliefs. It involves a political project which seeks to mobilize cultural resources to produce this recognition for every Hindu. What this means primarily is that the space of the country is filled with signs of Hindutva. Visual signs that accompany everyday objects and can therefore smuggle themselves into everyday practices (such as driving vehicles with stickers of 'om' for others to follow on the road), media technologies that are stamped by Hindu associations (cassettes, videos), textual material (textbooks) and so on are meant to produce a sense that the Hindu nation lives in everyday life.

It is here that historical references become important. They offer a sense of timeless continuity in the everyday life of the Hindu nation. The Hindu self is not to know of changes and differences with what it may have been. Hindutva demands that not only will there be a self-awareness of commonality across the diversity of spaces that make up the country, but also with the past. Monumental signs

of the past such as Ramjanmabhumi mandir (along with other mandirs that are to be 'restored' from Muslim ownership, architectural projects, names of public places and so on), ritual occasions such as Ram kathas, jagaran sessions where ancient texts are rekindled are meant to enter into a network of cross-references with the carefully selected details of history textbooks that reiteratively signal the glory of ancient India and the pride of belonging to it.

**E**qually, by actually bringing the past into the present (by building temples, cleansing secularist influences in textbooks), there is a deeper pride in the agency of the present for being able to reanimate the past in the present. The present with its projects and efforts controls the past and makes it a part of itself. It is this sense of power over the past that was articulated by Naipaul in a 1993 interview where, referring to the demolition of the Babri Masjid, he declared, 'Today it seems to me that Indians are becoming alive to their history. This has not happened in the past.'<sup>9</sup> It is interesting to note in this connection that Golwalkar does not envy the golden age for, he says, in affluence life is routine, whereas it is only 'adverse circumstances' (which is clearly the present) that provide an 'opportunity to put forth the best in us.'<sup>10</sup> The ancient past, however golden, is passive; it is the present that is active and the real source of glory.

The conjuration of the ancient Hindu past is not simply meant to provide a 'feel-good' impulse. Hindutva demands that the signs of Hindu self-recognition must replace those of other religions, belief systems and cul-

tures that see themselves as possessing equal claim to putting their imprint on the everyday life of the nation. The perniciousness and violence of this project may be understood if we contrast it with the renaming of streets, monuments and so on after the departure of the British. In this instance there were no residents who could be related to the erased signs.

For Hindutva, on the other hand, it is the signs of the living who can lay claim to be equally a part of the nation, that are sought to be erased or subordinated. The lives of others such as Muslim, Christians, secularists, socialists and so on are sought to be controlled through the signs of their difference. Thus the Ramjanmabhumi issue was the trigger for a larger attempt at the subordination of Muslims through the demolition of the Babri Masjid. This is an enterprise that necessarily involves their physical subordination, indeed the conversion of living people into signs and objects that can be burnt, raped, stabbed and erased by bureaucratic fiats (such as the ones that have recently removed refugee camps in Gujarat).

**M**hystory is crucial to this project for it collaborates in motivating and justifying it. Hindutva's narrative of the past revolves around two basic elements: the glory of ancient India and the humiliation and oppression of Hindus in the medieval and colonial periods. The project for self-recognition draws on both. By reanimating the past a continuity is established with ancient glories, while the very process of establishing the visible and tangible supremacy of Hindu signs over the land undoes the humiliation of the later periods. The present not only resurrects history, it also sheds its burdens. In other words, by bringing the past into a synchronous relationship with the present, Hindutva man-

8. Ibid. p. 16.

9. V.S. Naipaul interviewed by Dileep Padgaonkar. *Times of India*, 18 July 1993.

10. Prologue, Golwalkar, op cit.

ages to allegorise the present in terms of the past. Each Muslim/Christian/secularist/leftist/anti-Hindutva is a sign of the unnatural period of humiliation and each act of their subordination represents a step towards reanimating the connection with the primordial ancientness of the Hindu past and through it, to arrive at the belief that they are the nation while others may at best be a part of it. This means that the nation no longer comprises of equal citizens. It has (superior) Hindus and (subordinate) others. Mhystory justifies a normative reconceptualisation of the nation in terms of internal distinctions and hierarchies.

**T**here is no doubt that mhystory poses a challenge – separately and jointly – to believers and practitioners of both myth and history. Being a historian I cannot presume to discuss the ways in which myth can be disentangled from its complicities with Hindutva. Nor can I elaborate here on what may be done to snap history's ties to mhystory. Nevertheless I would like to dwell on the need to rethink an important historical attitude.

This concerns the relationship of history with the production of contemporary identity. It is a well established truth that the self requires a past for its recognition – both to tell itself and others. Historians in our country have provided recognition to a fledgling nation by dwelling on the history of nationalism. Historical research, working with secularist, multi-culturalist, politicized assumptions, may have complicated the notion of a homogeneous nation, but the nation nevertheless remained the reference point and touchstone of historical research.<sup>11</sup> In

this deep sense history has always been a handmaiden of present needs in our country. And it is precisely this assumption that Hindutva has worked upon and made more attractively radical by seeking to install the past as a tangible part of the present.

**I**n its stead, it seems to me, there is a need to orient historical practice by the idea that the past is radically different. The historian needs to research her material with the excitement of journeying into another country without a return ticket to the point of departure. This attitude is crucial if the present is not to become a point of authoritarian control. For the dice is always loaded in favour of the present: the point of departure into history (the historian and her material) and its return (the manuscript) cannot but be located in the present. The latter constantly informs the horizons of the past. But the horizon must remain as it is, a distant prospect and not become a travel chart, far less a route.

If present needs demand that the past be oriented by it, then what we will (and already) have is a control centric history, the problems of which are only too harshly visible in mhystory. On the other hand, the imagining of historical research as a journey can make the past confront the present with new possibilities and insights and make it aware of its limits. It may even generate fresh envisionings of the future. For instance, it may even make us more conscious of the boundaries of our identities and sensitise us to the compulsions of others who make theirs. Most of all the past needs to make the present unfamiliar to itself. History must acquire the power to surprise the present with its differences.

46 11. See Sumit Sarkar's observations in *Beyond Nationalist Frames*, New Delhi, 2002 on this subject. I have greatly benefited from his more elaborate talk on the same subject entitled

'Rethinking Modern Indian history: the limits of nationalist frames', delivered at the India International Centre, New Delhi, February 2002.

# Peace with the past

KRISHNA KUMAR

THE most obvious thing about the past is that it is past. No remarkable wisdom is required to notice this, yet it is difficult – especially in modern, literate societies – to overcome the temptation to live in the past. The construction and institutionalization of a national memory of the past necessarily implies imparting to the past a chronic half-life. Modern systems of mass education serve as a prime instrument of this process, and it depends on the quality of a system of education what kind of half-life the past will have – leaky or self-contained? A leaky half-life suggests the availability of the past as a resource for evoking passions and nostalgia. In the metaphor of radioactive waste I am using, ‘self-contained’ knowledge of the past would mean that it is accompanied by the awareness that the past is past.

My recently published study (*Prejudice and Pride*, Penguin Books) of school textbooks used for the teaching of history in contemporary India

and Pakistan shows that both countries transmit the knowledge of the past in a highly ‘leaky’ manner. This finding can hardly surprise anyone, given the backward and inefficient systems of education both India and Pakistan have, and also in view of the low priority they attach to the school-level teaching of social sciences in general, and history in particular.

In both systems of education, the teaching of history is perceived primarily as a means of citizenship-training for nation-building. Although this perception is not unique to India and Pakistan, the extent to which it influences the pedagogy of social sciences, especially history, is quite remarkable; in the sense that the nation-building role of history leaves no room *whatsoever* for pedagogic objectives, such as inculcating curiosity about the past and imparting intellectual skills to make sense of it. The pedagogic poverty of Indian and Pakistani textbooks becomes all the more influential,

given the dominant role and recall-oriented character of the examination system and its linkages with the prescribed textbook.

My clubbing of India and Pakistan in the preceding paragraph must have hurt many readers, and I can fully empathize with them. As educated Indians, we have all been socialized to perceive the creation of Pakistan as an act of betrayal and narrowmindedness; and now, more than half a century after that act was accomplished, we are led to believe that Pakistan is a failed state. While comparing ourselves to Pakistan, we take pride in having survived so far as a democracy, and especially as a secular democracy. These assumed points of our superiority are grounded in the contours of our knowledge of history, particularly our knowledge of Partition and the decade preceding it.

**S**chool textbooks offer us a valuable means of analysing this common knowledge, bits and pieces of which are dispersed by the Indian and the Pakistani systems of education within their respective territories. My study of a sample of these textbooks reveals that they socialize children into the ideological perspectives of two master narratives. The clashing structures of the two master narratives explains why India and Pakistan perceive themselves as irreconcilable national projects, though they have been around as separate nation states for more than fifty years now.

The Indian master narrative is structured around the idea that secular nationalism and communalism were historically alien to each other, and that the former is politically and morally superior. In the binary that Indian textbooks use to narrate the story of independence, secular nationalism symbolizes an accommodative, rationally organized vision of social transfor-

mation, while communalism symbolizes regressive social forces seeking sustenance from primordial sources of inspiration, including religion.

The Pakistani master narrative denies that India's independence struggle was secular. At the heart of this narrative lies the two-nation theory which claims that the urge to create Pakistan arose out of certain irreconcilable differences between Hindus and Muslims. The Indian narrative, of course, denies the validity of this theory, and by doing so, it disapproves of Pakistan, imbuing its existence – as the signifier of a regressive, divisive tendency – with suspicion.

**T**he structural features of the two master narratives I have outlined above impose severe pedagogic restrictions on them. These restrictions pertain to what the narratives can include as relevant historical facts or happenings and also, to how the course of the happenings selected for mention or emphasis should be placed. These are among the features or symptoms which enable us to analyse the two master narratives in a comparative manner.

For instance, the secular/communal binary which the Indian school histories use to tell the story of freedom does not allow them to acknowledge that there were organizational and social overlaps between the two ideologies. That Hindu communalism had a substantial presence in the Congress, and that it exercised great influence on the political and cultural ethos of the thirties remain unmentionable for many Indian textbook writers, and those who mention them do not attach any crucial significance to these facts. Apparently, any emphasis on Hindu communalism, especially on its role within the Congress, would spoil the neatness of the secular/communal binary which gives the Indian master

narrative a basic structure and also a moral overtone.

A simplistic separation of the secular from the communal outlook also affects the school historian's ability to use biography – an important aspect of the learning of history during childhood – in a purposive and credible manner. All eminent leaders of the freedom struggle end up becoming examples of a homogeneous bag of values. History textbooks fail to show why, for example, Tilak, Gokhale, Lajpat Rai, Bose, Nehru and Gandhi must be regarded as distinct personalities and political figures. An undifferentiating label of greatness that these and others carry defeats any larger intellectual purpose that the inclusion of history in the school syllabus might serve. The much avowed inspirational role of history becomes a mere shell when any analytical details that might help children perceive great personalities as leaders engaged in a political struggle, are withdrawn.

**H**istory turns into a brochure, and the personalities involved in it become cardboard figures juggled around in the theatre of significant events. This applies to Gandhi and Jinnah in both Indian and Pakistani textbooks, especially towards the closing scenes of their respective narratives. Some lives are sliced into two halves, one acceptable to the Indian textbook writers, and the other to their Pakistani counterparts – the fate of Syed Ahmad Khan and Iqbal.

Basically, both countries treat the history of the freedom struggle as a moral tale. The Indian version highlights the triumph of secular nationalism, and the Pakistani version shows how a cultural vision was realised despite gigantic political obstacles. Neither version has the capacity to accommodate complexities and ambiguities. The Indian version virtually



forgets about Muslim politics after the hopes born during the short Congress-League collaboration over Khilafat had died. Here onwards, the narrative must avoid the news of all but pro-Congress Muslims; that is why the Nehru Report, the meagre participation of Muslims in civil disobedience, the discord over basic education during the late 1930s, and the Lahore Resolution are glossed over.

The Pakistani textbooks give the Nehru Report a key place in the story they present; even the most compressed accounts find room for Jinnah's fourteen points. The controversy surrounding Gandhi's proposal for basic education also gets elaborate attention. But then, the brush with which both these matters are portrayed is too thick to do justice to the ideological struggle that existed within the Congress. Ignoring Hindu revivalist influence on the Congress enables the Pakistani school historian to target the Congress more purposefully – in terms of the larger orbit of meaning which Pakistan's young citizens are supposed to inhabit psychologically – by calling it a Hindu organization committed to establishing Hindu Raj in India.

**O**f course one can appreciate why the Indian narrative pays little attention to the course of post-1920s Muslim politics. The obvious reason is that the sub-plot of Muslim politics now onwards belongs to the story of Pakistan's freedom, not India's. However, our appreciation of this simple nationalistic logic should not blind us to the pedagogic and, equally significantly, the political cost of the school historian's decision.

The pedagogic cost is that the 1940s must come as a surprise. Without the background of the social and political alienation of the Muslim landed elite and the intelligentsia of

the northern plains, the student can hardly make sense of the sudden emergence of the Muslim League as a powerful actor in the early 1940s. Not surprisingly, the Indian narrative is extremely reluctant to go into the details of any event following Quit India. Textbooks jump from one mention to the next, rushing towards Partition which, from the point of view of the young student, begs for an explanation more substantial than what the British-Muslim conspiracy theory can provide.

**T**he subjectivity of millions, as shaped by the socialization inherent in the fable of freedom, sustains the South Asian geopolitical order. By depriving children of any rational means to comprehend the overlap between secular and communal nationalisms, the Indian narrative of the national movement socializes the young to perceive Pakistan as an illegitimate achievement. The rival persuasion, to which the Pakistani narrative is dedicated – both as a matter of educational policy and the structure of the story – is to see India as a Hindu nation. The denial of India's claim to being a secular state is central to the 'Pakistan Ideology' that school textbooks are supposed to uphold and disseminate. It requires either complete avoidance or, in the case of steadier accounts, serious downplaying of any events and personalities marking the spirit of secular nationalism which opposed Partition on moral grounds though it could not stop it from becoming a political reality.

Between 1857 and 1947, we can find episodes where the two narratives converge and others where they diverge. In Partition, we find symptoms of both kinds. The two narratives come remarkably close in the cursory manner in which they deal with the violence associated with Par-

tition. The horror and suffering that millions of ordinary men and women faced receive no more than a few lines of cold recording in most Indian and Pakistani textbooks. However, the treatment of Partition as a political event is completely different in the two narratives. For the Indian textbook writers, it was a terrible tragedy that marred the glory of independence. For the Pakistani textbook writers, it was a stunning achievement, marking an escape for the Muslims from the impending Hindu Raj.

By giving Partition the status of a great political – and not just human – tragedy, the Indian narrative fuses the secular and the communal perspectives which had so far stayed altogether separate from each other. Partition evokes an irreparable sense of national loss and victimhood in both progressive and conservative varieties of school historiography. The division of India becomes a memory that Indians must forever regret.

**I**n turn, the Muslims who share the blame for this act with the British in divided India's national record must continue to serve as a stereotype of betrayers. No wonder, the word 'Pakistan' is used as the name of a tendency in cinema and literature; and in every recurrence of communal violence, the memory of the creation of Pakistan is inevitably invoked. It is also not surprising that when a visitor from Pakistan talks about peace, substantial parts of the audience slip into the fantasy of a future when the two nations will be reunited. The visitor is mystified to think why his learned Indian listeners don't realise that reuniting with India will mean death for Pakistan and its struggle to establish a separate national identity.

The Pakistani portrayal of Partition as a political event also suffers from a sense of irony. The uncertainty

and anguish that Jinnah went through at the time of Partition cannot be represented, for it would diminish the superhuman image school textbooks give him. Textbook writers also find it hard to reconcile the idea that Pakistan was a vision preordained by destiny, with the role of manoeuvre in its actual birth. The Pakistani master narrative alludes to the two-nation theory soon after its coverage of the 1857 revolt, citing Syed Ahmad Khan as its earliest proponent. By the time the narrative reaches the early 1940s, it has already used the theory a few times to convey a sense of inevitability about the eventual creation of Pakistan.

**S**o strongly and repeatedly does the narrative, in most textbook versions, refer to Pakistan as a goal recognized from the beginning of the freedom struggle, that the only curiosity it can satisfy in the final episode is about how the goal was ultimately attained. Yet, when it comes, the final episode conveys the message that Pakistan was the outcome of Hindu intransigence expressed in the unaccommodative attitude of the Congress.

For Indian children, not just the narrative of the freedom struggle, but history itself comes to an end with Partition and independence. As a constituent of social studies, and later on as a subject in its own right, history runs out of content in 1947, except for some of the events associated with independence, such as Gandhi's assassination, making of the Constitution and the beginning of Five-year plans. What has happened in the last 55 years may filter through the measly civics syllabus, popular cinema and television; history as formally constituted knowledge of the past does not cover it.

Partition remains the last major event to have 'occurred' in India's long history, and as such it can be ex-

pected to maintain in the child's mind an evocative freshness – both as an item signifying the end of the freedom struggle and as a factor of children's socialization into a political legacy. Pakistan is a part of that legacy, and it is a highly significant political fact of contemporary South Asia that the last news Indian children get of Pakistan in the course of their institutionalized education is about its birth. For any more recent news, they must depend on sources like *Border* and *Ghaddar*.

For Pakistani textbooks, Partition marks neither an ending nor a discontinuity, and the narrative smoothly moves on. In the post-independence history of Pakistan, India figures quite often – in the stories of wars, in the context of Kashmir, or simply as a Hindu neighbour. Not just the teaching of history, the entire curriculum is embedded in a masculine, war-oriented and anti-Hindu ideal of the nation state. Textbooks interchange the word 'Bharat' with 'India' in a seemingly unpatterned manner, but if one looks carefully, the former gets preference in contexts which are explicitly hostile.

**I**f J. Krishnamurti's view that modern education constitutes a major threat to world peace needed any proof, India and Pakistan provide it in their daily teaching of history to the young. So long as they continue to resist the maturity that comes from feeling at peace with the past, they will keep on wasting incalculable psychic and physical resources in the name of security. This is no familiar plea by a peace-loving dove for cutting down the defence budget, for there is no room for such a plea in a democracy grounded in public illiteracy and poor quality education. For now, a plea for designing education, especially history, differently should suffice. This includes taking both education and history seriously.

# Historical pedagogy of the Sangh Parivar

TANIKA SARKAR

THE Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh is a cadre-based organisation with decided hegemonic aims. It seeks to politically educate its chosen cadres so that they can, in turn, disseminate select portions of the message among the various mass fronts that they might work with: electoral constituencies, students, women, tribals, slum dwellers, trade unions, religious bodies. The cadres develop different addresses for the different fronts, the accents and emphases varying considerably from the one to the other. Cadres thus are, in relation to the mass fronts, teachers, and, indeed, the affiliates of the Sangh call the Sangh itself their classroom. Teaching, therefore, is crucial to the agenda, evident in the fact that the

\*The research on RSS schools, reported more extensively elsewhere, was done together with Tapan Basu.

human resources ministry is reserved for a RSS hardliner.

Fully trained cadres, moreover, are the brahmans within the combine – in functions and, very often, in caste terms too. In any case, they are drawn from educated middle class, upper caste areas; and RSS *shakhas* too are mostly concentrated in similar spaces. The mass fronts, in contrast, are more diverse. They came up only after independence and with the appearance of universal adult franchise which necessitated a programme of going to the masses. The bifurcation in levels of education and training, related closely to caste and class divides, expresses a novel plan of hegemonic control, modifying, but not entirely replacing, older Hindu structures of inherited power and privilege. The older modes of leadership are now supplemented

with educated, trained cadres who derive their ascendancy from acquired authority rather than from mere inherited status.

If pedagogy is crucial, within it history commands a very special distinction. Almost all of the Sangh's present politics uses images of the past as both referent and justification: that is, most recommendations for present-day activity are projected as responses, reactions to the past. Elements of the past need to be recovered and applied, other elements need to be replaced, while past events need to be revenged continuously. There seems to be, thus, an unbroken, living dialogue with the past.

The intensity of the engagement is, however, simulated as much as are the images of the past. The whole purpose of the lived relationship with the past is to overwrite an engagement with the present, especially with its problems of Indian poverty, social oppression, popular resistance and neo-imperialism.

**T**he past that is constructed out of present interests and needs of the Sangh, the past which is an instrument in its present politics must, therefore, be an usable past rather than a real one, in so far as it is knowable through serious investigative methods. In order to be usable, it needs to reorient much of the knowledge of our past, as well as the epistemological and methodological bases for the construction of knowledge. No wonder that research organisations and teaching material are now controlled by Sangh-related teachers and historians, sometimes by Sangh *pracharaks*.

It is by now abundantly clear that the teaching of history is an arena of urgent concern and anxiety. I would like to argue that the anxiety arises not only because the educationists of Hindu *rashtra* must align their image

of the past to the politics of the present, but also because all known and accepted disciplinary conventions create a tough impediment to that effort. What is more of a problem for the Sangh is that most variants of historical scholarship, the world over are, despite considerable internal differences, concerned with understandings of various configurations of diverse kinds of power: whether they are Marxists or post-structuralists, feminists or new-historicists, they engage in unpacking class, caste, patriarchal, colonial, post-colonial, discursive and cultural operations of power.

**T**he Sangh is deeply uncomfortable with the entire exercise, since the only operation of power that it tries to identify is that of non-Hindus over Hindus—an identification that becomes untenable in the Indian situation where the Hindu majority is overwhelming and the religious minorities vulnerable in terms of material and political resources. The Sangh's relationship with history is therefore particularly fraught. It needs to possess the past, yet the accepted methods of representation are anathema to it.

The Hindu *rashtra* presupposes great excisions in collective memory as well as the production of counterfeit historical memories: experiences of poverty and exploitation to be overwritten by narratives of foreign conquests, military defeats and the ills that rulers of a different faith had allegedly done to Hindu temples, women and cows. Beyond a point, actual historical evidence for all this is thin, patchy or absent. There is, on the other hand, embarrassingly strong historical evidence to confirm the absence of the Sangh from the ranks of anti-colonial movements, of transactions with Italian fascism and self-modelling on the politics of Nazi genocides which Golwalkar much

admired. Professional expertise in historical investigations thus becomes an area of acute suspicion, even as the historical past becomes an essential commodity for possession.

Recent events in Gujarat well illustrate the Sangh methods of using and invoking the past. Narendra Modi's action-reaction thesis sought to legitimise anti-Muslim carnage on the grounds of Godhra events which, moreover, were ascribed to terrorists employed by Pakistan. However, Muslims who were massacred were obviously Indians, most of them so far removed from Godhra that they could not possibly have had a hand in those atrocities. A very large number of them were, moreover, children and babies, even unborn foetuses, not conceivably connected with Godhra, terrorism or Pakistan. Shrines of Muslim poets and musicians of the past were obliterated and desecrated, even though they too could not have contributed to Godhra. Muslims of the present, past and future, therefore, become exchangeable signs and anyone at any time can be seized upon in revenge for anything that Muslims have done, are doing, or can do. Both revenge and Muslim become mobile terms.

**I**f the past, present and future can freely change places, the very location and meaning of the past has to change too from all its known uses and connotations. The Sangh not only aspires to fill popular commonsense with its own reading of history, it also desires to fill up academic historical productions with methods and meanings that it generates. For, popular understanding as hegemonised by the Sangh cannot afford to be interrogated by more professional constructions, since the boundaries between professional and popular are permeable and porous.

They break down especially at the school level where students, car-

rying with them popular legends and myths about the past from the media, family memories and cultural representations are confronted with serious academic modes of ascertaining past events and processes. This very age group, moreover, is the primary target group of the ideological training that the shakhas of the Sangh provide. Consequently, competing images of the past become a risky venture since students are also taught to value a certain professionalism and academic canon.

**T**here is, moreover, an organisational imperative conjoined to the ideological one. The Sangh, as I remarked earlier, is itself structured as a teacher for a range of mass fronts, electoral party and religious organizations that make up the Sangh combine. It teaches all the leaders of the BJP, VHP and Bajrang Dal. Its daily shakhas are meant for training in combat action and ideological lessons. The message that it teaches to its cadres, and to members of other fronts, is entirely a historical narration which features only its own preferred version of ancient Hindu glories, Muslim atrocities and Hindu suffering in later periods.

Equally significant are the silences about internal power lines that run within the Hindu community. Again, this narrative cannot afford to be entirely out of sync with standard academic histories. If the latter proved inhospitable to Sangh instructions, then state power now gives the Sangh the authority to supplant the older academic canon with those of its own making; censoring research publications and archival compilations, withdrawing textbooks and ordering new history writing. In all the states where it has held power, history teaching and textbooks have been altered dramatically.

How does the Sangh propose the simultaneous demolition of accepted

historical knowledge and construct its own version as authentic scholarship? Above all, the Sangh has founded schools. The first school emerged in a significant context. It was during the partition riots and their aftermath that the Sangh made its real breakthrough in North India. However, its rapid expansion was briefly stalemated as it came under a cloud of suspicion after the assassination of Gandhi. Moreover, independent India began to function with universal adult suffrage, a development that the Sangh regarded with dismay.

Golwalkar had been brutally explicit in his condemnations of democracy and was especially critical of the power it would provide to labourers and low castes. Such frankness became muted as the Sangh too founded an electoral organ, the Bharatiya Jan Sangh, to contest elections and woo mass constituencies that would inevitably be made up of precisely those people. In the 1952 elections, however, the left emerged as the major parliamentary opposition to the centrist politics of the Congress. At the national level of political decision-making, the Sangh vision found little purchase.

**T**o vault over the impasse, the first thing that the Sangh did was to found a primary school at Gorakhpur in Uttar Pradesh in 1952 which rapidly spawned other Saraswati Shishu Mandirs in its wake. A Shishu Shiksha Parabandh Samiti was set up to coordinate the primary schools while bal mandirs began to develop for high school levels. The efforts were repeated in Delhi, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh and Andhra Pradesh.

In 1977, Vidya Bharati was institutionalised to coordinate schools at the all-India level. By the early 1990s, it was running the second largest chain of schools in the country,

controlling about 4,000 schools, 40 colleges, a total of 36,000 teachers and about ten lakh students. It developed the Haflong Project for the North East where Christian educational consolidation had blocked their spread. It also reached out beyond the regular school and college circuit. There are shishu vaticas for pre-school infants, to orient their physical, mental, social and spiritual qualities in tune with Sangh *sanskaras* or dispositions.

**T**he other project is that of *sanskar kendras* in geographically remote or socially marginalised areas; in tribal belts, rural pockets and urban slums. Here once-a-week lessons are provided by single teachers to generate training in 'religion, patriotism and Indian culture.' Whereas in its regular schools, middle class, upper caste children are given the full paraphernalia of modern education along with Sangh values, for the socially marginalised, Sangh values make up the entirety of educational efforts. While the poor are ideologically coopted, they are not socially empowered through a full-scale education.

Everywhere, teachers are recruited from RSS families, thus creating employment prospects for itself. To domesticate teachers who may come from other backgrounds, there are training camps that are organised several times in the year, widening the ideological net considerably. In general, the regular schools are located in areas which have an RSS centre and a VHP-controlled temple, usually attached to the school premises. There are evening and morning shakhas that the RSS runs for local children. The school is thus embedded within a tight and comprehensive range of institutions that would, in calibration, coordinate the child's leisure, education, ideological growth and religious understanding.

The cohesion is further consolidated by the fact that the regular schools are founded in neighbourhoods that share a fairly homogeneous caste-class and community profile. The bonds are strengthened by the teachers who make a point of regular home visits and dialogue with parents outside the school premises. The boundaries between the school and the family, between students and parents, are fluid, and Sangh teachers carry forward the school pedagogy beyond the school into the familial space. The school thus functions as a pivotal point within a larger envisioned community that aligns neighbourhood ties to Sangh influence.

**S**angh schools follow the regular school board curricula and examination system, even using the older NCERT history textbooks since no better alternative could be found that would enable their children to compete with other schools. Little wonder, then, that it sought to change the curricula and textbooks for all schools as soon as it acquired state power: its own children could not be protected from ideological contamination otherwise.

However, their schools left their own distinctive inscription on education in a variety of subtle ways. Significantly, an entire apparatus of audio-visual and pedagogical operations was developed to intervene in remaking historical understanding in opposition to older textbooks. First, the walls displayed maps of undivided India as the true shape of the nation, imparting in students a refusal of the historical reality of the Partition and visualising the country as inclusive of the states of Pakistan and Bangladesh. The refiguring of the map, moreover, requires explanations that inevitably provide an opening for accounts of the Muslim League plan for partition, of tales of Hindu sufferings in the

holocaust, the mutilation of the land – all of which inculcate the desire for revenge.

The walls are also festooned with pictures of Hindu heroes like Shivaji and Rana Pratap, visually invoking legends of Muslim tyranny and Hindu royal-heroic resistance. A continuous narrative of Muslim wrongdoing is immediately and imaginatively disseminated while the idea of resistance is ineffably associated with royal figures rather than with common people. Distinctive notions of right and wrong, justice and injustice, enemies and defenders of faith and nation are produced and instantaneously conjoined. In this Manichaean world, Hindu princes appear noble saviours while Muslims defile country and religion and this provides the only possible history of the country.

**I**n school assemblies, principals address students frequently on themes of Hindu patriotism, Babur and his mosque that allegedly destroyed Ram's temple, the saga of the Ramjanmabhoomi movement and its martyrs. Many principals had participated as *karsevaks* in the two attacks on the Babri mosque, and those recollections are renewed routinely to link up with histories of Rajput and Maratha wars against Mughals. The aim is to build an undying thirst for revenge. A headmaster of a primary school related to me how proud he felt when, in response to his description of the Babri Mosque demolition, little children of five were inspired to clench their fists and swear revenge.

To shortcircuit the effects of the pre-BJP curriculum, schools provided a special course on *Bharatiya-sanskriti* which was graded according to classes. All students of all classes have to study and pass examinations every year. The course has a series of graded textbooks which have provided the model for the

revamped history syllabi in the BJP-ruled states, and are no doubt the paradigm for the new NCERT syllabus that the BJP plans.

**A**s the authentic history of Indian civilization, such textbooks are faithful to Savarkar's definition: *Hindutva*, as a continuous, historically stable cultural essence, unifies India. All those who live outside its orbits – Indian Muslims and Christians, for instance – are non-Indians, enemies. The very land, in these books, is defined by a Hindu essence. There are no mountains or rivers as such, but all geographical features are depicted as objects of Hindu worship. Place names are fleshed out by pointing out their contiguity to Hindu pilgrimages, to sites where Hindu heroes fought against Muslims. Modern or medieval cities are identified by their ancient names. All past achievements – literary, artistic, architectural, musical, spiritual and scientific – are referred back to ancient, pre-Islamic eras.

The landscape is bereft of all Muslim or Christian cultural or religious presence. Nor do they figure as historical actors except as fifth-columnists for foreign powers or as invaders. There is a significant economy in the narration. History is shown to develop around a single axis which neatly bifurcates Indian people into true Indians and alien, as Hindus and others, as victims and tyrants, as invaders and vanquished.

The past, moreover, is used not as process, overdetermined and multifaceted with internal dialectical contradictions, nor does it have a synchronic unity or connectivity. It is a whirling pool of images and allegories, and events and figures can be pulled out of it at random, violating historical sequences at will to illustrate the same point across time and space. This methodological violence

is imperative. If a present politics has to convince people that Ram, an epic hero, was humiliated by Babur, a medieval emperor, and that present-day Muslims must be killed and humiliated to avenge that past.

Muslims and Christians are not simply invaders and conquerors of the past; they are fixed in eternal postures of aggression which, today, translates as insidious and covert gestures of hidden expansionism and conquest, carried on through conversion and terrorism. Histories of communities are not just unchanging and repetitive, they are, moreover, singular. History becomes emblematic, congealed into an array of postures, each summing up a whole community across the ages. The past is a museum of a few signs.

**W**hile ancient Indian glories are iconised, little is made available from the rich classical sources. The school hymns and *mantras*, invoking a militant and militarised nation worship, are modern ones, though composed in Sanskrit, and Sanskrit lessons teach spoken and modernised Sanskrit, not the literary or religious texts of classical Sanskrit. Even the devotional music that is taught is modern Hindi and Sanskrit hymns rather than the classical traditions. There is little actual knowledge of ancient Indian history or conditions, which are congealed into stylised icons.

Myths, epics and select fragments of historical episodes are joined together, again traversing chronological sequences freely and obliterating generic boundaries. Babur becomes the enemy of Ram, displacing Ravana, and the history of the demolition of the Babri Mosque is attached, with illustrations, to form a sequel to legends of Rajput and Maratha valour against Mughals. Demons and Mughals flow into each other and the Muslim becomes a free-floating signifier

completely detached from concrete historical contexts. Patriotism, is entirely identified with hatred and revenge, the country with threatened borders. People, land, water and air, their survival and their welfare, do not form any part of patriotism. Nation figures as death—the courting of it, the infliction of it.

The silences are resounding. There is no analysis of caste, poverty, gender abuses, no mention of what Hindus have done to Hindus. Nor, for that matter, of what Muslim emperors have done to Muslim peasants. Power, historically, seems to generate from Muslims as a homogeneous bloc directed at a seamless mass of Hindus. So students are not insulated from violence; rather they are flooded with a surfeit of violent tales, demanding violent reflexes in response. But anger or even critical introspection into histories of internal, social violence is carefully excised.

**F**inally, a word about the Sangh's pedagogical methods in conveying a sense of the past at shakhas and schools. It uses to a large extent oral tellings and the story format. This is a peculiarly effective mode, making as it does the past vivid, colourful, immediate, full of human interest and possibilities of emotional identification and imaginative participation. As a pedagogical tool, especially for very small children, its value is great and we all need to use it more, to integrate it with dry factual accounts or analysis.

At the same time, the mode cuts both ways. While it makes the past interesting, it also compels imaginative partisanship with figures and events which are part-invented, filled with vicious political values. Again, its dominance as a tool helps foreclose critical enquiry into the source, provenance, motivation, mode of con-

struction of the narrated tales. Stories demand a suspension of critical faculties, demand a reception that is warm, partisan, accepting of the narrative thrust. Before they can be opened up to re-reading, re-evaluation, a search for elements that are suppressed or distorted, the communal message has settled and struck roots, creating imaginative reflexes in lieu of critical rethinking.

**T**he historical tales, moreover, are subtly assembled. They are often made up of fragments from myths, genuine historical accounts, popular memories that are restricted and one-sided in their scope, for they ignore other memories. As part myths they command sacred meanings; as snatches of history they can be verified and authenticated; as memory they impel immediate recognition and acceptance. So, as a totality, they acquire multiple authorisation.

There are often strong anti-communal temptations to counter the plundering of genuine historical accounts by the Sangh in ways that certainly oppose the ultimate communal message, but which nonetheless replicate Sangh methods and attitudes towards history. One very obvious response is to fill up the crucial gaps left in historical memory by Sangh narrations, but then refuse to go beyond providing counters. For instance, manufactured tales of Muslim tyranny or exaggerated and partial narratives of Muslim separatism and violence may be countered by accounts of tolerant Muslim emperors, of Hindu Mahasabha espousal of the two-nation theory, or of Hindu violence in Partition riots. This is an absolutely necessary endeavour, urgent today as never before, since these facts will now face official suppression.

At the same time, while they may balance the perspective, trim off

exaggerations, correct distortions, it is dangerous to reduce secular history to rebuttals and rejoinders to Sangh historical claims: to get trapped eternally into a closed circle of charges and countercharges, for that forces history into the crude and empty polemical slot where the Sangh has placed it. There is a similar Manichean divide into good and bad, authentic and inauthentic, black and white, the same disregard for an understanding of internal contradictions, and impatience for ambivalences, ambiguities, complications.

Again, the urgency of building up counters to the Sangh entails the construction of alternative histories that the Sangh cannot accommodate, that provide the vital lie to the Sangh's monochromatic narrative of Hindu community and its others. We can – and we ought to – build up narratives of other struggles that will empower subaltern agency so that it will not be coopted by the Sangh's communalism and will recognise the crucial importance of histories of power in the realms of class, caste and gender. Yet, the very desire to have empowering narratives that celebrate subaltern agency can leave gaps and steamroller complexities in the interests of easy and simple celebrations.

**T**he very burden of historical narration – and its real interest and excitement – lies in that it must acknowledge a past that does not always yield up edifying tales, a past that is difficult and painful for us because we find in it not merely Hitlers but also Stalin, not simply peasant resistance but also peasant patriarchy, or working class racism. This perpetual shock treatment may stimulate a kind of despair that dismantles the very desire for historical truth claims as old-fashioned positivism, scientism. The disavowal of the historical truth claim or truth

aspiration simplifies the rich difficulties of serious investigation and narration.

We engage in such debunking of serious history, however, only when we are ignorant of the practice of history, of the spectrum of theoretical debates that emerge from an experience of that practice and which place historians within a creative and complex ambiguity that grapples with the inherent limitations and provisionality of the truth claim and the necessary discipline that still compels us towards accuracy and precision in investigation. It is out of this continuous, painful and necessary tension that rich historical understanding and thick descriptions emerge.

**M**ore than a commitment to the subject itself, it is also politically urgent to refuse to replace communal fables with anti-communal ones, or with tales that empower the right kinds of agencies. It is precisely in these times that we need to desperately assert the importance of being true to ascertained, verified, cross-checked evidence, academic and professional training, accountability and openness, that distinguish serious history from nice stories. It is precisely in these times when the VHP thunders that faith is higher than serious accounts of what actually happened, that we need to proclaim that we search for the latter, knowing its ultimate elusiveness in any closed, final sense, and knowing the constructed nature of our own accounts.

We need to court the label of being dated, unusable brands in the marketplace of saleable ideas to make that claim, knowing all its methodological risks and limits. It is a fidelity to what actually happened in Gujarat that makes our accounts of Gujarat's recent past different from Sangh histories.



# History at the madrasas

NITA KUMAR

HISTORY in Madrasa Jamia Irfaniya\*: It is class 8, a class of some 40 young men. They are sitting on benches and not on *daris*, only about four in the stereotypical caps, all looking smart and modern. And they are open. On my arrival, they get over their smiling and staring quickly and then ignore me and get on with their work.

The teacher gives them a brilliant lecture on the topic of the day, 'The Expansion of British Rule in India', sub topic, 'Control by the English over Bengal'. A familiar narrative falls on my ears. Alivardi Khan... Companies... Calcutta... Chander-nagore... fortifications... Mir Jafar... Treaty of Murshidabad... Battle of Plassey. The children are listening enraptured. Naturally. He is telling it like a story, like 'literature', even as he is peppering the blackboard at odd angles with scribbled names and dates.

\* The name of this madrasa and most others, unless in a citation, has been changed.

We come to the Treaty of Allaha-bad, and the signing over of the *lagan* of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa. At this point he alludes to the movie Lagaan. It is an appropriate reference, in that it is one all the children, maybe the whole nation would get. It is good technique. As an old-timer at developing techniques for teaching history, I only wish the young teacher had not been so unsure about his reference to a popular film, had not lowered his voice and implied, 'This is a mere aside, you understand; not part of my otherwise very serious history lesson.'

This excepted, I have no differences with him. He is spinning the same grand narrative of modern India that is familiar to me and thousands of others from school, college, university and our own work. He is a knowledgeable historian and consults no notes. He is a fluent speaker and is narrating at the level of the children. If I was a student in the class, I would respect

him involuntarily for being a strong authority figure, and for opening up so effortlessly a window into this exciting world of adventures for me.

**B**ut there is one grave flaw in his narrative, which he shares with all other teachers of history. He does not manage to communicate in any way, 'This place was called Bengal, but was an incipient India. It is *you, your* story. Alivardi Khan dressed like us, spoke like us. He was different because he was a nawab and had his own calculations. Should we discuss the priorities of a nawab?' What is not taught effectively in Jamia Irfaniya is not taught in any school in India: that a nation can have immense convolutions and still emerge, injured and imperfect (as a kind of miracle) *a nation*, which means (still more miraculously) that you and I and everyone else who lived here past and present *are one*. That we want to believe it and make it true. Let us jointly exercise our imaginations to see what this idea could mean (and what it leaves out).

But the students, as I said, are enraptured. Given the narrative as it stands, the teacher is a talented performer. The class is successful. If there is a shortcoming in the teaching of history in madrasas like Irfaniya, it is a shortcoming shared by all the schools of the country.

This particular teacher, Mr. Saiyad for convenience, also gives the explanation for this 'shortcoming'. The course to be covered in class 6, 7, 8 is huge: the whole of ancient India (including prehistory and early man), medieval India and modern India, respectively, with a large dose of civics in each textbook as well. Nothing is left out. The narrative is more condensed than one would find at higher levels but is the same compilation of facts. As Mr. Saiyad puts it, 'If you teach properly, you cannot just men-

tion an event, as the textbook does. You have to explain it. You have to use five sentences instead of one. Then they need to write everything. For them, nothing will be learnt if they do not write. So, how to use the half hour period three times a week (the other three go to geography)? Lecture? Have them read? Have them write? Correct? Discuss?'

It sounds impractical to me to suggest map-work, classroom activity, or innovative methods after this. In any case, no such methods have achieved legitimacy yet in Indian schools. There are many problematizations of the writing of history by sophisticated historians. They have no time for, and there is no discussion by others of, alternative classroom techniques to the present grand narrative delivered as boxed knowledge to empty receptacles. Comparing this technique at its best, as at Irfaniya, and postmodern history at its best, the moral I see is: A straight narrative is more interesting for children than an ironic, reflexive, open-ended one not at their level.

**T**he nature of Jamia Irfaniya: All this comprises 'history at the madrasas', but, as the four white caps remind us, we must ask: what makes this specifically a madrasa? Irfaniya is a modern building of three storeys, the rooms built on three sides around a courtyard, a wall on the fourth. They own a whole *katra* with some twenty shops. Their classrooms are large and all open onto the central courtyard through verandahs and balconies, as well as have windows on the opposite side, so are well lighted and airy. Let us go to an Arabic lesson in class 1.

There are about 20 boys and 10 girls, all small and sweet. They wear an assortment of clothes although some students' appearance tells us that the uniform is supposed to be white.

The little children could look like an illustration in the entry 'Education' of the Dictionary of Islam by Thomas Patrick Hughes published in 1885 (repub. Rupa, 1988). Children sit on a jute mat on the floor and recite loudly to themselves. When bored by reciting, they talk among themselves. The teacher says, '*Aiye! Sabak sikho!*' (Hey you! Learn your lessons!') And the boys I am looking at suddenly seem to fall over, sideways. No, they are beginning the recitation of their lessons. They sway and learn some five lines each every day. During the reciting they look away into the distance with glazed eyes.

**T**he maulvi can call them names, hit them or threaten them with a cane, and make them stand up in awkward positions. He summons them one by one and hears the lines they have learnt and 'gives' them the next three or four lines to learn up. They use the terms 'read', 'learn' and 'recite', but all the children are doing is deciphering the Arabic alphabet to read the Quran line by line, with no understanding of any word of its content. Separately, they learn at an elementary level what the duties of a Muslim are, in subjects called by the equivalent of 'Dini Talim', or, religious education.

The children could look like a benign illustration, but our modern pedagogic sensitivities, or mine at least, would question the validity of such rote learning and abuse. I would consider it 'pain' at two levels: at the daily level of how children are treated, and at the long-term level of their being denied choices in their future.

But this is a different problem to that of history teaching. The primary schooling in madrasas like Irfaniya, up to class 5, is in Urdu medium. They are moved in to Hindi medium in class 6, 7 and 8, then go to high school elsewhere. They have a platter full of lan-

guages: Arabic, Urdu, Hindi, English. They are learning in the basic *shiksha* pattern and use all the basic shiksha textbooks for all the subjects. Two extra languages and their initial religious education aside, children who study in Jamia Irfaniya are like children in other institutions. The history they learn is shared by all children. Insofar as this history is inadequately conceptualised and taught, all children, including those in the madrasa, are ill-fitted to be part of India. The failure is one of historians who write textbooks, administrators who design them and teachers who work out pedagogic strategies.

**M**adrasas: In the archival records of the British colonial state, as well as in the private records of members of the Indian intelligentsia, the indigenous school of North India is referred to by the generic term 'madrasa'. There is no exclusive implication of this institution as Islamic. This is close to the literal meaning of 'madrasa' which is 'the place of *dars*': *dars* being teaching, instruction, a lesson, or lecture.

Today, the term 'madrasa' stands for Islam. It does so, moreover, not in a neutral sense in which 'masjid' still means place of congregation, but rather in a heavily loaded sense of a place of *biased* and *distorted* learning. It is regarded, loosely, as a hotbed of terrorism in Pakistan and Afghanistan, and in India, of opposition to modernity and progress, by which is consensually implied both western modernity and progress as well as indigenous versions of the same. 'Close down the madrasas,' demands the popular press as part of its analysis of Islamic resurgence. 'These institutions, funded by external sources' is their description by a certain kind of layperson, meaning, 'anti-national external sources.' Madrasas are treated as the index of backwardness even by secular Mus-

lim intellectuals. The curriculum is not supposed to have changed from about the 13th century to the present.

In order to understand the nature of history teaching in contemporary madrasas in India more fully, we have to agree on the following: (i) Muslims are also heterogeneous, with sects, schools, ideologies, classes, gender divisions, subcultures and territorial and linguistic identities. One has to balance between generalization which reveals patterns, and contextualizing which is necessary for precision. (ii) There always exist several approaches to history, as written, taught and passed on. To judge any of them as right, wrong, correct, or false, we must specify *for whom* and *according to which criteria*. (iii) Muslims are not otherwise nice people who have somehow gone wrong on certain points. They must cease to be understood as *in opposition* to something normative and better. They are just themselves. Yes, to be 'oneself' is to have an oppositional identity, insofar as most identities, at all time, are articulated in opposition to an 'other'.

**T**he heterogeneity of madrasas: When students finish with class 8 in the madrasa described above, they go to other high schools in the city and continue in the same stream as in their middle school. I would call this a secular, nationalist stream, in intention, with failures in both the secularism and nationalism. Perhaps the biggest aspect of failure is that this education is relatively meaningless in their lives and some 90% of them drop out after class 8. Almost none of the students go on to Irfaniya's own higher classes. The equivalent of high school, intermediate and BA., are the munshi, maulvi, alim and fazil degrees awarded at two year intervals. These classes are housed in a separate building, also called Madrasa Irfaniya, under the

administration of the same committee, with a different principal and headmaster. This Madrasa Irfaniya is under the Arabic and Persian Madrasa Board of U.P. (and in the respective state, in each case). Such Boards run the four exams mentioned above, as well as others such as Qamil and Mumtaz-ul-Muhadassin.

**M**adrasas belong to a certain sect each, such as Barelwi, Deobandi, or Ahl-e-hadis. For some, including among the madrasa administrators, the differences between the sects is of utmost importance; for others it is trivial merging on inconsequential. Anyone who walks around to observe classes in, say, Madrasa Hamidia, Madrasa Dar-ul-Islam, or Madrasa Umahut-ul-uloom, each of a different sect, cannot distinguish how the sectarian differences play themselves out.

When asking about the textbooks, one learns from some teachers that there is a difference between Barelwi and Deobandi books, and from others that there is not; and typically that the differences are minor ritualistic ones regarding how to pray and whom to address. Reading the textbooks does not explicate the differences either. There are good, better and worse textbooks, independent of affiliation. They are written by diverse people, and published differently, with Deobandi ones written and published from Deoband (but also from Nadwa). Much as one would like a clear pattern to emerge that would match sectarian loyalties, it does not.

In history teaching, particularly, there is little chance of pinning down a Barelwi version of history as distinct from a Deobandi one. While there certainly exist claimants to a significant difference, the educators I personally have met are mostly of the opinion that the differences are greatly exag-

gerated and that the colonial state particularly distorted the relationship between them by exaggerating differences.

The most startling difference is not between the sects, which certainly do have separate institutions and constituencies. It is between the madrasa which is affiliated with the state board or the Basic Shiksha Parishad, and is secular and nationalist (plus teaching the Quran on its own and using Urdu as a medium at lower levels), and the madrasa which is affiliated with the madrasa board, and is explicitly religious. When marking this difference, we must also remember that for every hundred students educated in the latter religious system, some one thousand are educated in the secular, nationalist system. This may seem to mark the victory of the nationalist over the religious sectarian, but if there are certain rewards that come for students from such a victory, they are small and elusive.

**B**efore discussing this further, there is another important difference to be noted within the catch-all term 'madrasa'. Many children being educated are taught only at home. Either in their own home or in another's, children ranging from three to twenty gather to learn the Quran from a maulana or maulani, simply someone who has in turn read the Quran. Again, these children are never explained, and never understand, a single word of what they are reading. The *tarjuma*, or translation, of what they are reading, can be pursued, according to their educators, when they grow up—if they wish.

What history do these young students in domestic madrasas know? I tried to answer this with a group of a dozen girls ranging from six to sixteen, from beginners to those who had already read half the holy book. What

we would consider historical facts were unknown to them. They did not know who Babar was or what he had done. They did not know when India became independent (and if it had). Certainly, there is a gender difference too. Females are a notch more ignorant than males of modern narratives and facts, and no doubt more knowledgeable of histories of the family and community. But, as my previous research revealed, boys are ignorant also, even those who are in the primary sections of madrasas, and in such startling ways that the notch they are higher becomes invisible.

**T**here are other children who do not study at all, neither at home nor outside, neither the Quran nor secular subjects. They begin working early, and are among some of the most 'cultured' people otherwise. They go towards forming, however, the vast pool of India's illiterates. I mention them here in the understanding that a question about madrasas is really a question about Muslims, and the absence of madrasa education among Muslims is also a statement about madrasas.

To end, the heterogeneous nature of madrasa teaching is a product of class, sect and history. The upper classes and socially mobile Muslims will ensure that their children receive the best cosmopolitan kind of teaching beyond madrasas. Provincial Muslims of almost all classes will choose from among a range of madrasas, or of Muslim schools with no 'madrasa' in their name but with the same combination of national curriculum, Urdu and religious education. Poorer Muslims may be satisfied with no other teaching but the Quran at home. A very small number of the two classes above may send their boys for the religious education necessary for a professional religious career. The very poorest may dispense even with

Quran learning at home, but would certainly ensure that their children learn their vocation.

**T**he heterogeneity of history: There are two kinds of nationalist history. There could perhaps be a 'good' Indian nationalist history, but it does not exist yet. It does not exist anywhere, and it does not exist in the madrasas. The best that exists, as I see it, is articulated in a textbook like *Hamara Itihas aur Nagarik Jiwan* (Basic Shiksha Parishad, U.P., 2002). It could be taught excellently too, if used as a guide, and followed in principle and not in letter. A good teacher like Mr Saiyad dislikes this textbook because he does not find in it enough of a clear and strong narrative, and finds it too much like 'literature'. He does a wonderful job of teaching it anyway because he in turn makes history 'literature'.

Apart from the general problem that a nationalist history is a distorted and artificial one if not cross questioned and related to actual people's lives, this history has specific problems. Aurangzeb is always vilified, Akbar celebrated, heroes like Rana Pratap or Shivaji treated like saviours or martyrs, rather than as complex personalities. The long-term damage of such distortions is immeasurable. Children grow up into adults thirsting for some kind of revenge because they actually believe that 'In 3000 years of our history people from all over the world have come and invaded us, captured our lands, conquered our minds... all of them came and looted us, took over what was ours...'<sup>1</sup>

The second kind of nationalist history is a very weak version, where the teachers are unenergetic and un-

1. Speech by the President of India, A.P.J. Abdul Kalam, in Hyderabad, July 2002, for which I presume his speechwriters should be held responsible.

successful in communicating any sense of a nation, including the elementary facts. All the teachers, including the good ones like Mr Saiyad, consider this failure to be a function of the 'backwardness' of their students' families. Families should not be so ignorant, so uninterested in education, should somehow magically not be illiterate and pre-modern themselves. The subtext here is that parents should be able to help their children with homework and do their share of the teaching as it is supposed to be divided between home and school.

**T**here are two kinds of non-nationalist histories. The first is that taught in munshi, maulvi, alim and fazil sections. This is *Tarikh-e-Islam*, or *The History of Islam*, such as written by Sheikh Moinuddin Nadavi, published by Darul Musannafin, Azamgarh. Importantly, it is abridged by Asir Adravi from its original four parts to four thin booklets of some seventy pages each. These are the 'notes' that students actually memorize for their exams. It is consensually agreed that teachers do not need to explicitly teach or explain this history. It is there in the notes, and students can 'manage' on their own.

There are several versions of this history as written and published. In a Shia version, the position of Hazrat Ali will be different to that in a Sunni version. In Sunni sectarian versions there may be barely distinguishable differences, although an institution might prefer to teach its own publication. One version which is never taught in madrasas is the western version of the 'Venture of Islam', or even the histories of Islam written (in English) by western educated Indian or Asian scholars. These are taught in the Arabic history courses of Indian universities, but not in madrasas. One may question whether the

'History of Islam' as taught in board madrasas follows the norms of disciplinary history.

Like other textbooks, it sounds biased in little ways. Its biggest bias is to speak, not 'objectively', but as a concerned insider, thus: 'Before the coming of Islam, there was no worship of the Supreme God anywhere.' Another bias could be that it is one-sided. This history concentrates on Arabia and does not mention India at all. In justification of this and their total course, board madrasas maintain a career orientation logic. Their students are trained to preach and to teach, and all others can and do study in other types of schools and madrasas.

The second type of non-nationalist history is the local history not explicitly taught anywhere but known and cherished by children as they grow into adults in lieu of the teaching of other kinds of history. We should take this history seriously, for two separate reasons. If we were worried about a threat to nationalist history, we should know that it came from both a sectarian history such as the History of Islam, and from a local history that flourishes in the absence of deliberate nationalist teaching. If we were worried about a threat from nationalist history, we should also know that one of the ways to fashion a more humane, imaginative and correct history in the future would be to take seriously these local histories at present confined to the 'illiterate'.

**T**he oppositionality of madrasas: There is an immense variety of positions from within those who grapple with the question of the appropriate education for Muslims. We can barely touch on a few. The question, according to Dr Muqtada Hasan Mohammad Yasin Azhari, the Rector of Jamia Salfia, is not one of East versus West or Islam versus the West, but of what

is practical and desirable. Those structures which are practical and useful are taken over by Muslims regardless of whether they originate in the West or not, such as written exams. Muslims open the institutions needed by them.

Thus, for Salfia, it was necessary to have 'an educational institution where together with a high-level study of Quran and hadis, there would be higher study of Arabic language and literature, and there would be also the work of writing and publishing books, where books of hadis would be written and distributed...' (*Tarjuman*, Delhi, 1 January 1964, p. 10, quoted in *Jamia Salfia Markazi Darul Ulum ka Sankshipt Parichay*, Varanasi: Salfia, 1998, p. 30.)

**T**his is a fair description of the identity of a Madrasa Board madrasa. It is criticised by many educated people such as Masooda Khan, the Principal of Umahut-ul-uloom, who is against religious education. She considered other cities more forward than the provincial one she lives in, with its preponderance of 'traditional' cottage industry. Although not said by her openly, I understand that she is a pathan, or an ashraf of some kind and she considers weavers who do not value modern education backward. She is vehement in denouncing those who behave like frogs in a well, who provide services only to train maulvis, and who make religion the staple and be-all of their lives.

On my part I would like to separate the Arabic madrasas as specialised vocational institutions comparable to other narrow training institutions. Then I would propose we understand the bulk of madrasas in the larger context of schooling in India and modernity in India. In this perspective, I see schools in India as covering some five parts of a range of schools, each fad-

ing into the other. At one extreme, the institution with the weakest link to modernity is the municipal or mahapalika school. It has all the paraphernalia of a modern school except the teaching. It also has a colonial attitude in its core distinction between us, the enlightened, and them, the ignorant. Next to it comes the local 'English medium' school, which has all the same structural features such as age-graded classes, as well as furniture for children and the requirement of uniforms. Neither the students nor their guardians, nor the teachers nor the administrators, fathom the meaning behind the modernist features they live out, but compared to the first kind of school they live more of them out and more strictly so.

**N**ext in the range comes the madrasa. Yes, it is indeed more modern than the mahapalika and the neighbourhood convent school. On the face of it it is nothing but traditional. In the lower classes boys all wear caps, girls all cover their heads. All learn the Quran. But their buildings are cleaner and more solid; the classrooms better laid out, the books less in tatters, students and teachers more in harmony. The rote learning of the Quran with swaying of the upper body and recitation at an undecodable speed finishes off in the first years. Then there is the execution of the modern requirements of the writing of questions and answers, the preparation for exams and revision, and the grappling with several subjects in an age-graded way.

And, just to complete the argument, the next two phases are the imitation convent schools, and then the actual missionary and public schools. The history taught here is the same as in the others. Only its facts are better memorised by students and they are taught how to be more adept at spinning out narratives. The best cases

aside, one could argue that these schools, for all their liberalism, are more violent towards the child than the madrasa and more successful in transforming his being according to external ideological formulations.

**A** madrasa can be of many kinds; its history teaching of many kinds. When it is Islamic, it is geared to a profession. When it is secular, it is nationalist in the way prescribed by various Boards and common to all schools. This history is inadequately taught almost everywhere and is also faulty in its layout. If our aim is to have a successful teaching of secular and nationalist history, the madrasas are not the main defaulters at all. Insofar as they offer free or subsidised teaching to children, try to preserve a continuity between home and school and invest in most of the paraphernalia of modern schooling, they are indeed institutions to be emulated. Their teaching of history is not as bad as in our municipal schools and little private schools, and sometimes as good or better than in our grand private schools. It can certainly be improved in numerous ways, but none of these ways would be specific to the madrasa and would apply equally to the large variety of institutions and children in India.

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# Exploring alternatives

C. N. SUBRAMANIAM and RASHMI PALIWAL

EVEN as we write this essay the government of Madhya Pradesh has announced the closure of the social science teaching programme of Eklavya without even bothering to give an explanation. The programme was running in eight government schools and a proposal to extend it to all schools in two districts was pending with the government for the last two years. The government was then of the opinion that the programme could not be expanded without an 'external' evaluation, but has now closed it down without the benefit of one. This arbitrary action raises a number of issues which we will take up later and presently turn to children's sense of history and possibilities of interacting with it through formal curriculum.

Kosambi drew the attention of historians to the fact that the transition from tribe to caste and state societies was a constant feature of Indian social history and that a historian who cared to look for it would find survival of various stages of social evolution all around

him or her. This problem of multiple transitions and continuities, which he pointed to, has had a major influence on the texts on Indian history. However, its importance for teaching history has usually been ignored.

A society experiencing multiple transitions evolves a rich and nuanced perception of historical processes. Formal history teaching either serves to obliterate this understanding or encrusts it with pious banalities. Critical history teaching can be more meaningful if it were to draw upon this wellspring of historical understanding and provide it with methodological rigour. We draw upon our discussions with school teachers and children to explore some of these possibilities.

A lesson in the Eklavya class 7 text book discusses how royal dynasties emerged in different parts of the country during the first millennium of the common era. A thematic chapter, entitled '*rajvanshon ka banna*' talks of no one dynasty in particular but of the general process. The chapter

expects the teacher to preface reading with a discussion on kings the children know about. One of us happened to be in the class and was drawn into the lively discussion. We reproduce from the field notebook:

**I**t took them some time to warm up and one of them came out with a story of a king who died in battle. Subsequently his queen gave birth to two sons. Her brother usurped the throne and the boys grew up incognito. Eventually they killed their uncle to get their rightful inheritance. The discussion then veered to the kings of the *Ramayana*, Dasharatha and his wife Kaushalya, Ravana and his wife Mandodari – strangely Rama was just a prince. They couldn't remember the king in the *Mahabharata*, was it Arjuna or Krishna?

Then I turned to the main theme of the lesson, '*Raja kaise bante hain?*' (How does one become a king?) '*Lootmar karke, logon se zabardasti paise lekar, rangdari dikhakar*' (By looting, forcibly collecting money from people, by show of strength) was the unhesitating answer.

That was a rather strong formulation. Why was it necessary for the prospective kings to do such things? '*Taki log unse dare, logon mein khauff paida karke.*' (So that people get to fear them and to create terror among the people). Couldn't one become a king through honest and peaceful means? '*Koi apki baat kyon manega? Imandari se kamate rahenge to budhdhe ho jayenge – kuch nahin hoga.*' (Why would anyone listen to you? If you keep earning honestly you will only grow old).

Another child explored a different possibility – the prospective king could get two kings to fight, share the spoils with the victorious king and then himself become a king. This was contested by the others – why would

the victorious king share his spoils, he would rather kick him in the back! They then turned to another possibility: '*Khandani raja hote hain!*' When asked for an example, they mentioned some kings from the epics.

We returned to the original theme – '*Kya khandani raja bhi lootmar karte the?*' (Did the hereditary kings too indulge in looting?) The emphatic answer was, '*Nahin. Ve to praja ki bhalai chahte the, ve kyon lootmar karte? Ulta ve praja mein garibon ke beech apna dhan bantte the.*' (No! They sought the welfare of their subjects, how could they loot them? On the contrary they would distribute their wealth among the poor subjects.)

Isn't it paradoxical? The same person before he becomes a king indulges in looting and once he becomes a king turns benevolent! The children do not see this as a paradox – to them it is natural, '*Ab unke pas dhan hai aur chayan hai. Ab unka kam logon ki bhalai karna hai.*'

**B**ut where is the money to distribute among their subjects coming from? There is some confusion on this question. Different children in the class try various guesses: (i) The king would defeat other kings and get their wealth. This seemed the most plausible explanation. (ii) A child feebly suggested that he could be taxing his own people (*lagan leta hoga*). This is emphatically contested by a section of the class, '*Apne hi logon se thodi lagan ikaththi karega. Garibon se kya lagan le sakta hai? Aisa to sirf dushth raja karte hain.*' (How could he tax his own people? How could he get taxes from the poor? Only bad kings do such things.) (iii) '*Uski apni kheti hogi. Batai par deta hoga ya uske sainik usme kam karte honge.*' (He would have his own fields. He may give it out on share cropping or perhaps his soldiers worked them.)

And so went the discussion. These children had not read the debates on early states; they were innocent of Fox, Gordon or Wink, and yet these debates wouldn't have sounded strange to them and they would have engaged these scholars in some fruitful discussions! This is but one of several such discussions we and the teachers associated with the programme have had with children on evolution of religion, caste, imperial policies and British policies towards peasants or tribesmen! All these institutions are evolving today and children are experiencing these transformations at close hand and hence have a deep and perceptive understanding of them. The children went far beyond the scope of even our chapters and delved into great complexities.

It is true that the children are not witnessing any primary state formation. Yet they have drawn heavily not only upon folk understanding passed on through the epics, but also upon the experience of the emergence of fresh power centres around them.

**W**hen we set out to develop new history texts over 18 years back we were ignorant of these possibilities. To us history was to be written by historians and transmitted to the masses through 'popularisation' efforts. Popularisation required that we meticulously remove all verbiage and reduce all concepts to concrete images so that those not familiar with the jargon of the historians could understand the substance. A second innovation, also inspired by pedagogic concerns, consisted in structuring a degree of discussion in the classroom between the teachers and students through guided questions.

1. For other examples see Rashmi Paliwal and C.N. Subramaniam, 'Texts in School', *Summerhill Review*, December 1998 and 'Eklavya Social Science Programme: A Review' (unpublished).



These two innovations enabled ordinary school teachers and children to engage with those histories and this engagement inevitably drew upon their experiences and perceptions. They had their own perceptions and understanding of social processes against which they measured the theories of historians, sometimes dismissing them as nonsensical, or as enriching their own understanding, but seldom feeling them to be outside their area of interest.

**A** necessary concomitant of such engagements were methodological debates. Whenever there were two contending conceptions, methods of validation came to the fore. In our debates with the teachers it got firmly established that 'sources' were central to this process. This opened up a Pandora's box of problems: what constituted a source, how does one interpret a source, and what does one do with contradictory readings of sources. We realised that the entire range of issues had to be introduced to students too, and a large number of our class 7 books dwelt on various aspects of sources and their interpretation. A byproduct of this was a challenging project undertaken by Shereen Ratnagar to prepare a book on sources of ancient Indian history for teachers.<sup>2</sup>

Imperceptibly we were moving from the framework of 'popularisation of history' to 'democratisation of production of historical knowledge.' A fuller realization of this objective would involve generation of local history and relating it to the mainstream historiography. This is what Eklavya was embarking upon with two kinds of interventions. First, an attempt was made to interact with college teachers

spread across M.P. who were engaged in research in order to build a fruitful dialogue between them and metropolitan historians. This also took the form of intervention in a journal devoted to research in history and folklore published from Ujjain.

Second, Eklavya also initiated a process of bringing together district level intellectuals including school teachers and others to prepare materials on local history, geography and developmental issues.<sup>3</sup> The larger vision was to link up all these into an effort to redefine the meaning of history teaching. It is rather unfortunate that the Government of M.P. should have decided to discontinue the experimental social science teaching programme at this point. The challenge now is to carry forward the process outside the framework of formal school curriculum.

**I**f history teaching is really an interaction between different ways of constructing the past, some incipient and others mature, then it is necessarily embedded in deeper social concerns. We would like to share here our dialogue with teachers on hunter-gatherers. It is rather puzzling that most mainstream history textbooks have little to say about hunter-gatherers, and the chapters on the stone age are usually confined to discussion of tool types and some banal generalizations.

Likewise, despite the fact that tribalism is a very significant way of life, globally and in our country, textbooks have little to say about it and almost entirely concentrate on state societies. This neglect of social dimensions of prehistoric societies and early social forms has important political

implications. In ordinary school teachers it reinforces the view that hunter-gatherers and tribals are 'sub-human' – ignorant, uncultured, unsocial, lawless. The image of 'nasty, brutish and short' lives of the 'early man' gets transferred to and reinforces the image of modern tribals and by extension of all depressed sections.

**I**n our teacher trainings we decided to take up precisely these issues for discussion. A typical session would begin with our requesting them to articulate their views about prehistoric people. Invariably the stereotypical images would be expressed and often they would draw parallels with the tribal people they know of. Over two days of intensive discussions, viewing different kinds of stone tools and paintings, reading ethnographic materials and Marshall Sahlins' essay on the 'original affluent societies' would enable most teachers to grudgingly acknowledge that they needed to revise their view of both the prehistoric people and contemporary tribal societies. Some of them would begin to recognise the importance and relevance of value systems, knowledge systems and aesthetics of the tribal people and the hunter-gatherers.

Such re-examinations help alter the framework of political understanding within which teachers work. One might cite another example from the other end of Indian history. Eklavya chapters on 'modern India' concentrate on the experience of a cross-section of the population during the colonial era and their reactions – women, peasants, tribals, middle class, industrial workers, industrialists and so on. Significantly, local memories of colonialism and the freedom movement are full of these images. Yet the textbook narratives of the freedom movement which emphasize one homogenous anti-British 'national movement' have

2. Shereen Ratnagar and Ajay Dandekar, *Bharatiya Itihas ke Srote: Prachin Kal*, I, Bhopal 2001. The second part of this book is forthcoming.

3. The state government too has announced that local geography and history would be made a part of school curriculum. How serious is this effort meant to be and how it plans to execute it remains to be seen.

little space for these images and invariably the grand movement of the national movement culminates in the formation of the post colonial state.

Broadly the scheme seems to legitimise the modern state with the halo drawn from the freedom movement. When teachers read the chapters on women and tribals they are not only moved but also begin to see that the tasks of the freedom movement remain incomplete and those who fought against British rule find their problems intact after half a century of 'self rule'.

**T**he radical possibility in the curriculum emerges precisely because of the dialogue between the lived experiences and textbook narratives. Sensitivity to lived experience is rather difficult to achieve in textbooks written without a reference point. Textbooks developed by the NCERT or the manifold private publishers or even the SCERTs do not locate themselves among a people—they remain aloof as historians are supposed to be. When Eklavya books were developed in the regional context of western M.P., friends in the NCERT looked upon it as some kind of benevolent work for a small rural area with little relevance for textbook writing for the entire country, which was the agenda before that venerable institution.

Subsequently, Eklavya was invited by Lok Jumbish to develop a curricular package for middle schools in Rajasthan. This gave us an opportunity to develop a similar package but rooted in a different context. This effort not only meant looking for Rajasthani examples (archeological sites, local dynasties, etc.) but also revising our own notions of Indian social history. The liminality of Rajasthani folk culture so ably highlighted by Shail Mayaram, Dominique Sila Khan and others prompted us to rework our conception of religious history. Thus, instead of the two chapters on Hindu religion

and Islam, we now had one chapter on religious life of the people.

Rajasthan is particularly rich in folk memories of history preserved by bards and a long line of local historians. We came across several school teachers who had meticulously documented oral traditions relating to the settlement of their villages and the various communities of the region. Most of them pertained to the later medieval and early modern epochs. We had just begun to work on them as a part of the class 8 curriculum when the Government of Rajasthan equally arbitrarily decided to dismantle the work of Lok Jumbish and terminated the arrangement with Eklavya.

**T**his brings us to the problem we had begun the essay with: the relation between the state, professional academics and civil society institutions in evolving curricula. Development of a meaningful curriculum which treats people not merely as recipients of knowledge but also as generators of knowledge requires a collaboration between the three. Unfortunately, we do not yet have institutional frameworks and processes to bring the three together.

The erstwhile monopoly of state institutions gave governments arbitrary powers to determine the nature of the relationship between the three 'actors'. This has given a free hand to the petty political considerations of the day to interfere with curricular matters. The need then is for working out norms for the collaboration and ensuring transparent and mutually agreed methods for decision taking. Of course all this is based on the assumption that the state is committed to developing a liberal and democratic curriculum. The events of our times have only helped to shake our confidence in the commitment of our state to such ideals.

# What happened to Confucianism?

KUMKUM ROY

THE new NCERT books in the social sciences, as well as in other subjects, are finally out. Some may be relieved but others are agitated and angry. Perhaps it is necessary to take stock and see what is in the books and whether or why the contents are important. We know that there is no longer a separate history textbook for class 6, the subject being part of a textbook that deals with social science as a whole. But what is the history that this text contains?

There has been an ongoing debate about whether children need to be taught history or not. History (and mathematics) tend to be amongst the most unpopular subjects in school for a number of reasons, including the fact that oftentimes history books tend to be stuffed with facts and dates making for dull, tedious reading. But if we agree that social sciences can help us understand diversity and social change, then history too has a critical role to play. What we need to work on is to make learning history more challenging, to take pains to explain to children how we find out about the

past, how sources may be interpreted and read, how historical generalizations may be possible, because that in itself can be an exciting story. History can give us insights into the diversity of cultures and the nature of historical change.

The new class 6 textbook creates an impression that Indian civilization has long been a changeless one. In the search for a temporal depth, Indian civilization is presented as static, its essence formed from the beginning of time. While discussing technology we are informed that stone axes, spears and grinding stones used in the pre-historic period are used even today (p. 52). Nor has the notion of the sacred altered very much since ancient times: 'The pipal tree was worshipped and revered by the Harappans which continues to be worshipped even today. These people also worshipped Siva in the form of linga which is done today also' (p. 83-84). The Rigvedic people worshipped many gods representing forces of nature such as fire, sun, wind, sky and trees. They are worshipped

even today. In Harappan civilization we find depictions of many things like the pipal tree, Saptamatrikas and Sivlingas which are revered by Hindus even today (p. 90). The practice of burying the dead and making a tomb over it or marking the place by erecting a stone continues even today (p. 105-106, in the context of megaliths). It is as if the ancients defined for all times the cultural principles of Indian civilization.

**I**n referring to the *varna* system, the textbook says: 'The Rigvedic society mainly comprised of four varnas, namely Brahmana, Kshatriya, Vaisya and Sudra' (p. 90). We are never told that the only evidence for the fourfold division from the Rigveda is drawn from a single verse of a single hymn that many regard as a later inclusion in the text. Thus, the caste system is represented as being in existence since time immemorial (incidentally, the text does not provide a date for Vedic literature), even as most recent research suggests that the *varna* system developed in the later Vedic times when pastoral groups took to settled agriculture.

In discussing the economy, in fact, the evidence of pastoralism is entirely eliminated. We are told: The economic life of Vedic people centred around agriculture, arts and crafts and trade and commerce. Bulls and oxen were used for ploughing and drawing carts. Horses were used to draw the chariots. Amongst the animals cow was given the most importance... (p. 89).

While agriculture is certainly important in later Vedic literature, it seems to be relatively unimportant in the Rigveda, where the hymns by and large represent the concerns of a pastoral elite. But for reasons best known to them, the authors believe that the predominance of pastoralism has to

be denied and India represented as an agrarian society from the earliest Vedic times. Possibly pastoralism is associated with the absence of civilization, and the Vedic people have to be always presented as the embodiment of civilization. To claim civilizational status for the Aryans, the evidence of pastoral past has to be erased.

**W**hen we project present categories back into the past and are insensitive to the temporal dimensions of historical developments, we are guilty of anachronistic thinking. Some anachronisms are easy to detect, others are more difficult to pin down. Nonetheless, they can be problematic. Consider the statement from page 57 in the context of early civilizations:

This not only required participation of people on a large scale but also obeying the law and realizing one's own responsibilities as part of community, society, culture and nation.

Such a statement can confuse and mislead children. Nationalism and national identities developed in the modern period from the 18th century onwards. To refer to ancient nations is anachronistic.

In discussing politics, present political ideals and principles are anachronistically traced back to the past, emphasizing once again the formative influence of pre-Islamic history in the making of Indian society and projecting the ancient past as essentially modern. In the Vedic period, we are told, 'There were rules which governed the debate and behaviour of members in Sabha and Samiti like in our Parliament' (p. 89). In the *gana-sanhgas*: 'The rulers were chosen by the people of the kingdom (sic) like we choose our government today' (p. 93). In the Mauryan empire: 'As before, the King was assisted by a council of ministers. It was called the *mantriparishad* like today' (p. 101). During Harsh's time:

'The empire was divided into provinces, called *desha*. These were further divided into districts known as *pradesha*. Officials in charge of a district were called *ayukta* and those in charge of provinces were known as *kumaramatyas*. These words are still used in the administrative machinery of the country with sometimes the same meanings' (p. 120).

The authors of the textbook seem to operate with the notion that history is a record of some kind of an Olympic event, given their preoccupation with classifying developments as the first and the best, occasionally at the cost of truth.

\* We are told that the Harappan civilization was 20 times larger than the Egyptian, and 12 times larger than the combined civilizations of Mesopotamia and Egypt (p. 80).

\* We also learn that Upanishads are the works of most profound philosophy in any religion (p. 91). Remember that this statement is addressed to students of class 6, who may have neither the ability nor the inclination to grapple with abstruse philosophical notions. As such, they will have no option but to accept this assertion which is repeated in the chapter on world religions (Upanishads are the greatest works on philosophy in the history of humankind, p. 134).

\* Page 91 also includes a truly phenomenal account of the mathematical achievements of the Vedic people, most of which are attributed, with a greater degree of accuracy, to Aryabhata on p. 117.

The message of the text is clear: The Ancients were great, their achievements unsurpassable, and their glory incomparable.

**T**he text is full of contradictory information. In its introductory section on History, the class 6 book for Social Sciences says:

For a long time humans did not know how to read or write. But how do we know about people who lived such a long time ago? We know about them through certain clues: They are in the form of tools, pots and pans, jewelry, buildings, coins and writings (p. 50).

What do these sentences suggest? They seem to indicate that people did not know how to read and write, but then go on to state that we know about them from their writings.

Similarly there are statements in the text that can only bewilder students. Consider a typical paragraph from the chapter on Roman civilization (p. 70):

Some of the important Roman kings were Julius Caesar and Octavian Caesar. Octavian introduced a number of reforms. The Romans worshipped gods like Jupiter, Minerva, Venus, etc.

**T**here is no information about what is the significance of these gods and goddesses, nor is there any awareness that Julius Caesar was assassinated because of his aspirations to power, nor is the more well-known name of Octavian, Augustus, introduced. Yet, this confusing paragraph is to provide answers to the following questions (p. 72): Why is Julius Caesar famous? Augustus was a famous king of Rome (true or false).

Consider yet another statement, this time from page 58:

You may be surprised to know that Indian and Chinese civilizations are the only ones which have survived right from the time they came into existence till date. They have retained many of their basic and distinguishing characteristic features which link them with the past. All other early civilizations have disappeared and the present people/civilizations have no connection with the past ones.

This, once again, is misleading on at least two counts: (i) Greek and

Roman civilizations, which the student is expected to study, did not die out completely, nor for that matter did civilizations in Mesopotamia and Iran. (ii) This conveys the impression that Indian and Chinese civilizations have been changeless and/or static. Once again, this is not true.

The book abounds in dozens, if not hundreds of such passages, which can only encourage rote learning and kill the curiosity of children.

**H**istorians no longer think that history is simply a chronicle of facts about the past. But what is one to say when a textbook proliferates with inaccurate statements? Let me give some instances:

\* Mesopotamian civilization is supposed to date to 5000 BC (p. 63). If we accept the definition of civilization mentioned on p. 57 (with cities, writing etc), Mesopotamian civilization is not earlier than 3500 BC.

\* Greece is described as surrounded by three seas, the Aegean (spelt Agean), the Ionian, and the Mediterranean (p. 66). A look at any atlas will show that this is wrong. The seas are the Aegean, Adriatic and Mediterranean.

\* The most frequently represented animal on Harappan seals, we are informed, was a bull (p. 85). Actually, over a thousand seals (more than 60 per cent) carry representations of a one-horned animal, often referred to by archaeologists as the unicorn. This was a mythical animal.

\* On page 88 we are informed that the geographical boundaries of the Rigveda and the Harappan civilization coincide. This is entirely inaccurate and deliberately misleading.

\* Even more worrying and inaccurate is the statement (page 89) that among various animals, the cow was given the most important and sacred place in the Vedic period; injuring or killing of cow was prohibited, and the cow

was called aghnya (not to be killed or injured). The Vedas, we are told, prescribe punishment for injuring or killing a cow by expulsion from the kingdom or by death penalty as the case may be.

This is inaccurate, although (and perhaps because) the cow was revered and treated as sacred, it was also offered as food to guests. More important, the Vedic texts (which by the definition of the textbook include the Vedas, Brahmanas, Aranyakas and Upanishads) are not prescriptive. As such, they do not mention punishments for violations of norms. This happens much later in the Shastric literature. Also, there is plentiful archaeological evidence from a number of sites, including Hastinapura, to suggest that cattle were slaughtered for meat in ancient India.

\* We read on p. 101: 'In no other period of Indian history do we find so many officers as in the Mauryan period.' One wonders who counted the administrative officers, and how and when was the count made.

\* On page 91 we are informed that the Vedic people knew that the earth moved on its own axis and around the sun. The moon moved around the earth. They could also apparently predict eclipses.

**S**cientific discoveries of later period are here projected back to the Vedic times. Poor Aryabhatta, who figures on page 117, is effectively eclipsed for his achievements. Ironically, one of the claims made in the National Curriculum Framework is that our children know nothing about Aryabhatta while they know about Newton. Keen on celebrating the Vedic age, the new textbook, in a contradictory move, attributes the discovery of eclipse both to Aryabhatta (p. 117) as well as to the Vedic people (p. 91) who are, in any case, timeless and all knowing.

\* On page 98 we learn that Chanakya was 'a teacher of Arthashastra in Takshashila University.' One wonders whether he was a Professor, Reader, or Vice-chancellor in this imaginary institution.

\* Ashoka is supposed to have said that 'disputes must be settled by talks among the elders of the communities' (p. 102). This, once again, is a statement for which no evidence is forthcoming from Ashokan inscriptions.

\* 'The last Mauryan king, Brihadratha had lost the loyalty of the army. The Army Chief, Pushyamitra Sunga killed him in 187 B.C. and himself became the king. This is the only incident in the history of India till 12th century A.D. when a king was killed and replaced' (p. 102).

**O**ne wonders why these two dates are chosen. Is it because Brihadratha may have been a Buddhist? Again, the assertion that no kings were killed between the 2nd century BC and the 12th century AD belies the history of warfare in the country. To cite just one instance, Samudragupta, the famous Gupta ruler is described in the Allahabad pillar inscription as *sarvaraj-occhhetta* (i.e., the uprooter of all kings). And such instances can be multiplied.

\* Chola kings Rajaraja and Rajendra are inaccurately mentioned in the Sangam age.

\* One final example: this is from the description of Rigvedic society (page 90). We learn that: 'The teachers were called brahmanas; rulers and administrators kshatriyas, farmers, merchants and bankers vaisyas, and artisans and labourers as sudras.' This is the most detailed account of varna in the entire text. As mentioned earlier, reference to the four varnas occurs only in one verse of the Rigveda, and this is embellished with later shastric

prescriptions to create an illusory account of the caste system.

The choice of evidence always tells us about what authors seek to tell and what they wish to repress. A single specific example would show how the politics of repression works in the new NCERT textbook. On page 90, we are told that in the Vedic period yajnas were the most common rituals. However, nowhere are we told that yajnas, including the famous asvamedha yajna, involved animal sacrifice. There are other significant omissions. The word tribe figures nowhere in the text. In other words, entire sections of the population are denied a history.

**H**ow important was religion in ancient India? If you turn to the introduction (page 50) you will find a list of books that are mentioned as sources: 'In India we have examples of the Vedas, Brahmanas, Upanishads, Smritis, Ramayana, Mahabharata, Sangam literature and Tripitakas.' Note that seven of the eight texts listed are religious texts, and six of them are associated with brahmanical Hinduism. While it is true that many of the best preserved texts that have survived from ancient times are religious texts, historians have used other kinds of literature as well. These include works on grammar, medicine, plays, statecraft, to name a few.

This preoccupation with religion leads to problems with the way in which information is presented. This is evident in the chapter on Harappan civilization, where certain pots are identified as kamandalu, although we do not know how they were used, and a rare seal representing the svastika is highlighted (p. 83). Even more bewildering is the focus (p. 85) on a terracotta female figurine with a vermilion mark, and to see the figure of a so-called yogi, who is rather

well-dressed, with a well-trimmed beard and a tiara on his head.

The chapter on 'The Vedic Civilization' is even more problematic. There is absolutely no reference to dates. So are students to be told that the Vedic texts are timeless? These problems surface most sharply in the chapter on major religions that brings the section to a close. The data from this chapter is tabulated on the next page.

If one compares the columns, one immediately notices how uneven the information is. Hinduism, Buddhism and Zoroastrianism do not have any dates assigned to them. What is more, Hinduism is defined as eternal. One wonders what is the place of a timeless phenomenon in the mundane framework of a school history book. Second, Christianity is not supposed to have space for any 'higher' aspirations, unlike the other religions.

**O**ne can quibble about the inclusion of deities in the list of Hindu gods. What is most obvious is that the decline in importance of Vedic gods such as Agni, Indra and Soma is glossed over, as that would involve talking about change in what is projected as an eternal religion. The discussion on social norms is woefully inadequate. Varna is left undefined. Ashrams we are told, were meant to be 'followed by all individuals irrespective of their caste, creed and belief.' If we look for evidence for this wide-ranging claim, our efforts are unlikely to yield results.

Apart from Hinduism, none of the other religious traditions are credited with any philosophical ideas, neither are they supposed to have traditions of devotion. As in many other instances, this is entirely inaccurate. Not surprisingly, Hinduism is the only religion that is credited with tolerance. What is also intriguing is that sectarian splits are highlighted only

in the case of Jainism and Christianity. Once again, the fact that there has been sectarian strife amongst Hindu groups is glossed over, presumably because this would sully the picture of harmony.

The discussion on the geographical spread is also interesting. Hinduism is understood to be an all-time, all-India phenomenon, whereas there

is no mention of the spread of Christianity anywhere, including to India by the early centuries of the Christian era. Presumably the Syrian Christians belong to West Asia. Churches are also unheard of. While there are references to Buddhist and Hindu architecture and sculpture in the other lessons, this is the only point where Christianity is spoken about. But then, as is obvious,

this is meant to be only a token gesture to tolerance, respect, acceptance and understanding.

What is obvious then is that some religions are treated as being beyond history, although included within the book, others are subjected to a selective treatment, and in no way is the understanding of any religious tradition significantly enhanced.

	<i>Hinduism</i>	<i>Jainism</i>	<i>Buddhism</i>	<i>Judaism</i>	<i>Zoroastrianism</i>	<i>Christianity</i>
Time	Very old, 'eternal spiritual tradition of India' can be traced to Harappan times, which may be identical with the Vedic	Arose out of Upanishads and six philosophies of Hinduism. Biography of Mahavira, dates to 6th century BC	Biography of the Buddha, but no dates	Reference to migration from Egypt in the 13th century.	Founded by Zarathustra (no date)	6 BC, with birth of Jesus
Goal	Union with paramatma	Attaining kaivalya	Attaining nirvana	Communicating with god	Destroying evil	
Deities	Three supreme gods, Brahma, Vishnu and Maheshwar, other gods and goddesses, forces of nature, plants, rivers, mountains			Monotheism	Ahura Mazda	God, son and holy spirit
Social norms	Varnashram dharma (only ashram is explained)		Anybody could join the sangha			Brotherhood
Philosophy	Greatest in the world					
Bhakti	List of saints including Ramanuja, Tulsi, Meera, Kabir					
Ethics/teachings	Non-violence, mercy, compassion, friendliness, charity, benevolence	Truthfulness, no property, non-injury, against theft, chastity	Four noble truths			Love, brotherhood, compassion
Attitude towards other religions	Sarva dharma sambhava					
Sectarian splits		Digambara and Svetambara				Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Protestant
Geographical location		Karnataka, Orissa, Tamil Nadu, Malwa, Gujarat, Rajasthan	Spread through Central Asia, East Asia, and Sri Lanka	Palestine, migration to Egypt and back	Iran, then western India	Palestine
Texts			Tripitaka	Torah	Avesta	Bible
Temple				Synagogue		

Histories of religions can and have been written. These focus on changes in doctrine, rituals, practice. They also document the ways in which religions have spread and/or been transformed. Besides, they deal with dissension within and oppositions to specific religions. There have also been studies on the social categories who have supported specific religious traditions. To be meaningful, such exercises have to acknowledge the possibilities of historical change. If this is not done, we are reduced to the kind of writing that is evidenced in the book.

Is the textbook sensitive to issues of gender? One of the criticisms of existing books (and this is entirely justified) is that they tend to be gender blind. This is apparent in the language used in the illustrations, as well as in the content of the text. Very often they are written in such a way that a reader gets the impression that either women do not exist, or that they are irrelevant or unimportant from the point of view of the subject in question. This is a situation that can be remedied if there is a will. But unfortunately, the will seems to have been lacking in the case of the text we have examined.

Consider the first substantive chapter on history, The Early Humans. As the title suggests, there is an attempt to talk about humans instead of men, but the term itself is cumbersome. People would probably have been a better substitute. More important, when we come to the questions and exercises, the author(s) slip back into the old usage, so we have references to stone age man (Question 1, iv), early man (page 56, things to do) etc.

School textbooks do require periodic revisions to incorporate new ideas and ways of looking, and to make them more pedagogically sensitive. But we need to ponder hard when this rewriting takes on the form that it does in the new NCERT social science textbook for class 6.



# Books

**THE MYTH OF THE HOLY COW** by D.N. Jha.  
Verso, London and New York, 2002.

THE cow, like the snake charmer, has been engraved in essentialist notions of India for at least the last two centuries. While snake charmers have become virtually extinct, the bovine population in the subcontinent is very much alive, if not kicking, and can be encountered on any street corner, scrounging through garbage dumps. Worshipful attitudes, if any, towards these creatures are conspicuous by their absence in most situations; at best they are treated with lazy good humour, at worst, they are subjected to callous indifference. And yet, paradoxically, the cow is often resuscitated and projected as a symbol of 'Hindu' identity, as an animal that has been revered since time immemorial as the 'holy cow'.

This, as D.N. Jha argues, is far from the truth. He takes the reader through a wide variety of textual evidence to document that beef was consumed and, by extension, that cattle were slaughtered on both ritual and other occasions in early India, to establish that beef eating was a part of pre-Islamic traditions in the subcontinent.

Jha starts with evidence drawn from the Vedas, generally recognized as the earliest extant textual traditions of the subcontinent, dateable to c.1500-600

BCE. He suggests, as indeed is widely accepted, that the prayers and chants contained in the earliest Veda, the *Rgveda* (c.1500-1000 BCE), represent the hopes and fears of a predominantly pastoral people, drawing attention to the vocabulary, where imagery and symbolism derived from cattle proliferate. This is then extended to an analysis of the sacrificial offerings to the principal deities, which include amongst other things, animals such as the goat, bull, ox and barren cow.

At another level, the author documents prescriptions and injunctions that indicate that meat, including beef, could be served and consumed to mark significant events in the life of the householder. These included visits by distinguished guests, and funerals. There is evidence suggesting that meat was eaten on less spectacular routine occasions as well. Besides, cattle were valued as draught animals and for the leather, which was worked into a range of products, including trappings for chariots, amongst the most important symbols of power in a mobile, pastoral society.

If the utility of the cow is acknowledged within the textual tradition, archaeological evidence of cattle bone, bearing cut marks, suggests that the consumption of beef, along with other animals, birds and fish, was fairly commonplace in early India. These remains have been recovered from a number of sites. The prob-

lem is in correlating the archaeological evidence with the textual traditions: the latter tend to defy specific localization, although there is a broad consensus that the early Vedic texts relate to the north west of the sub-continent, while the later Vedic texts pertain to the doab of the Ganges and the Yamuna, including the areas around present-day Delhi, and beyond. In any case, the fact that a variety of meats were eaten in early India is beyond dispute.

In fact, more than thirty years ago, in 1967, H.D. Sankalia, often regarded as the 'father' of Indian archaeology, suggested that: 'The ban on cow slaughter is indeed of comparatively recent growth, mostly as a reaction against Islam rather than genuine, real love and reverence for the cow.'<sup>1</sup>

Sankalia went on to document archaeological evidence for the use of beef from virtually all parts of the subcontinent, with some findings dating back to the earliest pre- and proto-historic sites. Incidentally, sites from which cattle bone bearing cut marks have been found include Hastinapura in the Ganga valley, recognized as the centre of the political universe in the *Mahabharata*, the epic whose nucleus may be traced back to c. 800 BCE (it received its present form c. 4th-5th centuries CE).

Such tangible evidence tapers off in subsequent historical phases not because of a shift to vegetarianism, but because excavations in most early historical cities have been extremely limited as these continue to be under occupation. This is true for cities like Patna, Varanasi, Mathura and even, to an extent, Delhi, that have been more or less continuously settled for nearly two and a half millennia. In such situations, excavations are, more often than not, confined to small vertical trenches that provide extremely narrow bands of evidence on material culture and do not permit a systematic reconstruction of dietary practices.

To return to Jha's argument, his analysis of the Vedic evidence suggests that attitudes towards cattle, and towards the slaughter of animals, were by no means monolithic. On the one hand the cow was occasionally equated with goddesses, including the Earth and Speech. Bovine imagery is invoked to convey notions of fecundity, prosperity and by extension, power. In other words, there is an implicit and occasionally explicit divinization of cattle.

At another level, there was a strand within the tradition that explored alternatives/substitutes for the sac-

rificial cult in general and the victim in particular. Besides, at a more mundane level, the slaughter of cattle may have appeared counter-productive in a situation of agrarian expansion, with an increasing dependence on plough agriculture, where draught animals, in particular, acquired a new significance. Historians have regarded this as a likely scenario for the mid Gangetic valley c. 6th century BCE. Jha opens up these possibilities for scrutiny, drawing on detailed documentation provided by archaeologists, Sanskritists and historians of religion.

What is also interesting is Jha's argument that non-injury of animals did not necessarily coincide with a reverential attitude towards them. He draws on early Buddhist traditions where the killing of animals in the sacrificial context is condemned, perhaps in order to draw sharp boundaries between Buddhism and brahmanism. At the same time, animals are viewed as inferior to human beings and incapable of attaining the ultimate Buddhist ideals of enlightenment and liberation. Besides, Buddhist narratives contain numerous allusions to the consumption of meats including, inevitably, beef.

In a sense, the Buddhist attitude towards animals was pushed to its logical conclusion within Jainism, where there was an overwhelming emphasis on *ahimsa* or non-violence extending to all forms of life, coupled with a belief that life as a human being was the prerequisite for the quest for liberation (*moksha*). At the same time, the practice of eating meat is documented in some of the earliest Jaina canonical works.

Somewhat later (c. 3rd century BCE), the Mauryan ruler Asoka, ruler of a realm that stretched from present-day Afghanistan to Karnataka in South India, attempted to regulate animal slaughter. This is evident from his inscriptions. What is noteworthy, however, is that although Asoka is occasionally projected as a pacific ruler, with obvious sympathies for Buddhism, he did not (or perhaps could not) impose a complete ban on killing animals. In fact, Buddhist attitudes towards meat eating were also complicated: certain sects, including the Mahayana, moved towards a position of abstinence and attempted to rework earlier narratives, reinterpreting references to meat eating to suggest alternative explanations to provide vegetarianism with a respectable ancestry.

Subsequently, the slaughter of animals and the consumption of meat continued, even as it was viewed with increasing disapproval within the 'high' tradition. In the *Manusmṛti* (compiled between c. 200 BCE-200 CE), often regarded as the archetypal law code of early

1. H.D. Sankalia, 'In History', *Seminar* 93, (The Cow), May 1967, pp. 11-12

India, an attempt was made to distinguish between eating meat on ritual occasions, which was permitted, whereas the same practice was condemned in less exalted contexts. What is nonetheless interesting, as Jha observes, is that killing cows is never classified as a major sin. (Conventionally, brahmanical texts recognize five major sins: these include killing a brahmin, stealing, drinking liquor, having sexual intercourse with the wife of a guru, and associating with those who were guilty of such offences; killers of cattle are not listed in this exclusive list). All of these somewhat contradictory ideas and values find space in later texts and commentaries, some of which continued to be written till as late as the 18th century.

At another level, some of the earliest compilations of medical lore in Sanskrit, the *Caraka* and *Susruta Samhita* (compiled between c. 2nd-4th centuries CE) recognize the medicinal value of a variety of preparations made from meat and fish, amongst other things. Incidentally, beef figures amongst other therapeutic substances. Besides, the five products derived from the cow, including milk, ghee, curds, urine and dung, are frequently recognized as purificatory substances in a range of other texts.

Jha also collates references to the consumption of all kinds of birds, beasts and fish from the epics, the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*. The former, in particular, is a sprawling text, running to a hundred thousand stanzas, compiled over centuries. As in the case of most composite works, it represents the practices and traditions of diverse peoples. Yet the central protagonists of the texts are the *ksatriyas* or warriors, generally ranked second in the conventional ordering of the caste hierarchy, after the brahmin priests. In other words, the evidence indicates that the consumption of meat was fairly routine amongst the elite. To an extent, this is corroborated by courtly literature, which represents sages and kings as consuming and offering meat as a part of hospitality on special occasions, including sacrifices.

In spite of this, Jha argues that there was a shift in attitudes towards the practice from the mid-first millennium CE. He contextualizes this in terms of a spurt in agrarian expansion. This is a connection that may not seem particularly obvious to most readers, and we would have benefited from further elucidation. What is more obvious is that condemnations of cow slaughter become more frequent with the passage of time, and beef eating is classified amongst practices that are particularly unsuited to the present degenerate age. (Degeneration, according to this world-view, has been steadily eroding our moral values since

3102 BCE!). Nevertheless, the use of beef has continued, more or less legitimately in different parts of the subcontinent.

It may be useful to look at some of the other ingredients of the notion of decay. We find an odd assortment: some, such as beef eating, are acknowledged as practices that were prevalent in earlier, less troubled times. Interestingly enough, the practice of levirate, documented in narrative traditions, especially in the *Mahabharata*, also figures in this list. These are portrayed as being unproblematic in their own context, when practised by sages and 'great men', but are not to be emulated by lesser mortals. Other practices are represented as symptoms of a degenerate world. These include the proliferation of insubordinate women, and men (and presumably women) who violate the norms of caste society. While some of these ideas can be traced back to earlier times, they acquired greater currency from the mid-first millennium CE.

There is another phenomenon that we encounter in inscriptions, from c. 2nd century CE onwards. Many of the inscriptions that survive from this period are panegyrics of kings, often composed by court poets, who understandably paint glowing portraits of their patrons. As may be expected in such genres of composition, these are usually conventionalized and fairly standardized.

For instance, the ruler is almost inevitably equated with one or more epic heroes and/or deities, his prowess is extolled, he is depicted as the epitome of beauty, master of a range of arts and traditions, and upholder of the social order. This is, more often than not, defined in terms of preserving the distinctions amongst the four castes, and it is in that context that kings are often projected as protectors of a pair of categories generally grouped together, viz. the cow and the brahmin.

How do we understand and evaluate such claims? While many of these inscriptions were taken at face value and culled for 'information' when they were first discovered, careful scholarship often revealed that the texts were a part of elaborate strategies of legitimation, devised by or for rulers whose claims to status were somewhat nebulous. So we find rulers of 'foreign' origin, such as Rudradaman, a Saka (the term used for Scythians in Sanskrit), as amongst the first to use Sanskrit in inscriptions. Such strategies may have been useful in glossing over his origins and could have been deployed to win the support of the local elite.

Claims to uphold the caste order and to protect the cow and the brahmin seem to be part of this package.

We know that the first claim was particularly incongruous when voiced by rulers whose own status within the caste order was uncertain, as they were regarded as outsiders from the perspective of the brahmanical tradition. In other words, we perhaps need to view these assertions as a bit of window-dressing: it is quite unlikely that rulers paid more than lip-service to the protection of either of the two endangered species.

Given the nature of our sources we may never be able to reconstruct a cow's eye view of the past. We are better equipped as far as the brahmins are concerned. While the brahmanical tradition is extremely diverse and complex, one strand that runs through it perhaps deserves our attention. We find a constant assertion of claims to sanctity. This takes a variety of forms: in normative literature, for instance, the brahmin's life and possessions are represented as being far more valuable than those of other caste categories. We also have a variety of narratives, circulated in different genres of literature, which elaborate on the dire consequences of defying these norms. Kings who humiliate brahmins, for instance, are invariably shown as meeting a sticky end.

It is likely, as has been suggested by a number of scholars, that such grim reiterations were necessary in situations where brahmanical ideals were contested in day-to-day situations. It is in this context that I think we need to explore why the brahmins co-opted the cow as part of their strategies for survival as a priestly elite. This is an intriguing question that remains almost unaddressed in our preoccupation with what is, by all accounts, a burning issue in contemporary India.

The last decade has seen a resurgence of Hindu fundamentalism in India, which has taken a variety of forms. Some of the most visible manifestations have included the destruction of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya in 1992, and the more recent ongoing violence in Gujarat, where we have witnessed unprecedented attempts to wipe out populations, monuments and memories.

The campaign to erase memories has been both systematic and pernicious. We have had attempts to censor school textbooks on history, where references to beef eating, amongst other things, have been deleted. These deletions were ordered in October 2001 by the National Council of Educational Research and Training, an institution that plays a crucial role in shaping educational policies for schools. The Central Board for Secondary Examination complied by instructing school principals to ensure that the

deleted passages were not taught or discussed in class, and that no questions on these subjects were asked in examinations.

Like most cases of censorship, this proved somewhat counter-productive: students, who more often than not find history a dull subject, began reading the proscribed passages more carefully, and there have been continuous protests and widespread debate on these issues organized by educationists, teachers, parents and representatives of political parties. There have also been small victories: the attempt to prevent the publication of Jha's book, for instance, has fallen through, and a provincial High Court has allowed publication of the Indian edition of the book.

Perhaps, as in the case of the cow, our best hopes for survival lie in the coexistence of multiple, even contradictory traditions. Beyond its immediate polemical value, Jha's work is a timely reminder of these complexities. Paradoxical as it may seem, the cow was offered in sacrifice and as food as a mark of honour because it was valued in certain contexts.

Besides, condemnations of animal slaughter by Buddhists and Jains did not stem from reverential attitudes towards either the cow in particular or animals in general. All through, the utility of the cow was recognized. And, by the mid-first millennium CE, the cow was adopted as an extension of the persona of the brahmin. Yet none of these attitudes attained universality; there were and always have been dissenting voices. We need to ensure that this heterogeneity survives, and is not flattened into a homogenized representation of the past. That would be disastrous for both our present and future.

**Kumkum Roy**

**BEYOND NATIONALIST FRAMES: Relocating Postmodernism, Hindutva, History** by Sumit Sarkar. Permanent Black, Delhi, 2002.

**HABITATIONS OF MODERNITY: Essays in the Wake of Subaltern Studies** by Dipesh Chakrabarty. Permanent Black, Delhi, 2002.

THESE recent collections of essays by two distinguished and differently positioned historians of South Asia signal in their own specific ways that the debate on 'rewriting history' in the subcontinent has begun to graduate to a more conversational and sincerely revisionary enterprise. Working through the immediate contexts and concerns for a less pathological politics,

the volumes certainly move beyond the initial reactions of threat, puzzlement and professional self-justification to address several methodo-philosophical issues foundational to the historical discipline at large.

To come to the differences that define the variously inspired trajectories of our historians, it is crucial to note that both of them share a sharpened sensitivity to the heuristic inadequacies of many of the received categories that we, disciplined by history, often consider as resolved. Historical materials and experiences, the historians insist, are a great deal less tidy than these terms would teach us to expect.

For Dipesh Chakrabarty, this is particularly evident in the way the social science discourses treat practices of faiths and beliefs: 'We do not have analytic categories in our aggressively secular academic discourse that do justice to the real, everyday, and multiple connections that we have, to what we, in becoming modern, have come to see as nonrational.' An unreflexive secularism, he argues, only sustains 'hyperrationalism', or the 'strong spirit of hostility between the rational and the affective' initiated by a culturally oppressive colonial rule.

Chakrabarty sees this fissure in the methodological structure developing into a full-scale epistemological crisis as he proceeds to argue that inhabiting modernity is also an act of inhibiting its definition. At one level this is simple post-colonial common sense: one must resist the reduction of differences between modernities to the gap between a good original text of European Enlightenment and a bad, belated colonial translation in order to combat the continuing violence in the name of modernization; 'what we had, warts and all, was, indeed, our modernity.'

At another level, however, this is also about refashioning the terms and modes of disciplinary knowledge, because it is through their claims of universality that the violence of the modern operates and legitimizes itself. In its drive to render every historical difference commensurable, this violence flattens the variegated experiences of lived societies into empty, objectified knowledge, although, as Chakrabarty asserts in an admirable essay on Ashis Nandy's politics of critical traditionalism, '[t]here are parts of society that remain opaque to the theoretical gaze of the modern analyst.'

These are areas 'where we live only practically', impervious to abstraction and, therefore, portability. Thus shut out from all epistemological accesses, in Chakrabarty's nuanced conceptualization, the raw experience of this subaltern survival in itself consti-

tutes the limits of modern disciplinary knowledge. If we cannot talk about it but only live it, then, one may choose to ask, how do we translate this modest and unintended role of providing critical limits to theory into one of staging an active resistance to the violence of categories in order to change the texture of knowledge?

Sumit Sarkar finds the agony rather misplaced. The problem is not with modernity, he says, but with an essentialized 'postmodernist' view of modernity, sanctioned by erasure of dialectics, dismissal of immanent critique and conceptualization of 'processes and categories... as free from internal tensions.' This in turn has resulted in bypassing what he thinks the enabling elements for a transformational politics in postmodernism and thus created the spectre of unmovable categories which is now haunting its own world. Hence, Sarkar reasons, the ironical reinforcement of binaries in late *Subaltern Studies*: privileging of myth to history, community to class and religious traditions to secularism.

Through a more tortured and intimate relation with different narratives of modernity, which also encourages an informed but situated conversation with 'postmodernism', Sarkar himself can be seen as moving towards a largely neither/nor history (particularly in the essays on early 20th century Bengali lower caste narratives, responses to colonial introduction of abstract and disciplinary time, and reading of one of Tagore's novels, Sarkar presents the case for complicated, shifting and differentiated hybridities).

In his discussion of the intellectual beginnings of Hindutva, he brilliantly shows that myths can contribute, in equal proportion to history, to discursive closures, statism and reproduction of prevailing social relations. Much of today's *Subaltern Studies* anti-statism, he points out, rests on a silent elision of historical specificities of the modes and formations of state oppression. And in this context he strategically repositions the Marxist histories as post-nationalist histories by returning a whole range of earlier critiques of nation-state from within that tradition.

That the question of categories is not merely a problem of philosophical hair-splitting but also one of structuring and organizing our mundane strategies of survival is well illustrated by Sarkar's spirited and timely critique of both the blatant jingoism of the Hindu Right and the more clandestine resignation of the mainstream left leadership to a rabid 'fetishization of maps and frontiers'. However, Sarkar's perceptive analysis

of the potency of the category of the nation to subsume a supposedly radical post-nationalist politics is somewhat marred by his choice to miss, what one may call, a history of 'the BJP bomb' from below.

Once we agree to disengage the subaltern from the residue of moralistic pedagogy, it leaves little scope for dodging with the fact that many real-life disempowered people actively and, for many of us, embarrassingly participate in euphoric nuke-nationalism. Sarkar himself opens the essay with the observation that '[o]ne of the frightening things about nuclear bombs is the way their possession gets normalized.' We should be wary of reducing this complex process of 'normalization' into a model of passive subaltern acceptance of virulent elite propaganda and rehabilitating a purely repressive and conspiratorial view of power. The same point might be raised about the relative underplay of the affective in Sarkar's narrative of lower caste groups extending support for integrationist-communalist projects.

This, I think, gestures at two larger methodological problems with which both the volumes engage in different ways. First, how does a philosophically positioned historian address the disaggrieved in the subaltern? Second, how does she attend to the teasing gap between pedagogy and performance, between discursive constructions and historical enactments of subject-positions?

Chakrabarty responds to the first question with an intriguing ease: the category of the subaltern has to be radically rethought, he says, 'as the *ideal* figure of the person who survives actively, even joyously, on the assumption that the statist instruments of domination will always belong to somebody else and never aspires to them.' Histories that try to 'instill or incite' in the figure a desire to participate in the statist/totalist imagination are immersed in an undemocratic (because the desire has to be 'brought from outside') mode since the subaltern is 'by definition' – and here the deconstructionist historian reads Gramsci remarkably literally – incapable of thinking the state. In the same essay, however, Chakrabarty argues for 'a subaltern historiography that actually tries to learn from the subaltern' through an open-ended 'dialogue' unconstrained by any predetermined philosophical and ideological obligation of the historian. Contrarily, it can be argued that such a conceptualization of the subaltern, which leaves her locked within an essentialized, self-consciously utopian definition of joyful incapability, as well as delimits her 'active survival' by keeping a reductionist rein of predictability ('will always...

never...') on her potentially ever-refractive 'aspirations', violently impedes the dialogue. Moreover, here the historian is prescribed an almost positivist repression of her own 'political philosophy/ideology', whereas in another powerful essay that challenges the universalization of public/private binarism through a discussion of the interrelation between subaltern sensibilities about filth and the demand of colonial and postcolonial bourgeois modernity, Chakrabarty declares the virtual impossibility of a nonaligned academic observer.

We have already entered the second problematic. To effectively contest the imperialism of categories we should combat not only the entities of, but also the relations between, historical terms. Otherwise, we might tend to reinforce an unprocessed essentialism, as Chakrabarty does when he says: 'The politics of being human differ between and within cultures. We are not impervious to one another but that does not mean that the differences are not real,' forgetting that this reality of differences is derivative only of the reality of categories through which we separate and form cultures.

But to re-interrogate difference is also to re-examine the materialities within which the production of historical knowledge is possible. And if here one finds Chakrabarty's mysteriously neat and almost teleological history of Subaltern Studies ironing out historiographical digressions and detours related to the collective's belated but intimate habitations of first world academia, only to make 20 years' collective practice appear 'in retrospect' as having always been 'a democratic project meant to produce a genealogy of the peasant as citizen in contemporary political modernity.'

Sarkar, who is quite critically sensitized to the institutionalization of Subaltern Studies in the context of a globally hierarchized division of intellectual labour, can also be seen as placing an unmediated emphasis on expertise and eminence of Indian left-secularist historians, which remains somewhat innocent to the power relations within third world knowledge industry. To dispute the sacred positivist difference between the historian and the historicized as a foundational given is also to remain aware, against the stealers of surplus meaning in the economy of categories, of the undesired beneficiaries of discursive struggles.

As Sarkar shows, 'Being more conventionally "secular", in the predominantly Indian sense of non or anti-communal, has often involved immersion in a

language of "national" unity as the supreme value, "integration", independent development along technocratic-statist lines.'

It is as a token of the commitment to this usually complex, frequently self-defeating and yet always promising traffic between historians' enunciations and subalterns' enactments that these volumes are to be remembered.

**Bodhisattva Kar**

**HISTORY AND PRESENT** edited by Partha Chatterjee and Anjan Ghosh. Permanent Black, New Delhi, 2002.

THE introductory essay by Partha Chatterjee titled 'History and Present' is a dramatic critique of the conceit of the historian and his craft. He draws attention to the need that scientific history and its practitioners have felt in the past decade to seek legitimacy and validation for its methods and findings from an external authority outside of itself – the domain of the 'popular'. Tapati Guha-Thakurta's essay on the museumisation of the Didarganj Yakshi by art historians and museum officials reinforces Partha Chatterjee's argument. According to Partha Chatterjee, this need was precipitated by the rise of the Hindu Right in the 1990s, both the result of as also leading to, the fall of the Babri Masjid.

The Hindu Right, in Chatterjee's view, drew its ideological legitimacy from the 'politically sanctioned outpourings of semi-literate prejudice.' The professional historian and history was pitted against 'partisan historians and archaeologists who had some academic credentials or accreditation.' This domain of the 'popular', which had hitherto been considered both illegitimate and vulgar, forced historians to revise the basis of the discipline and practice of history. The limitations of the methodological repertoire of the historian were brought into relief in this battle of wits with a foe wielding the sword of the 'popular' – a popular which is not a 'massified, homogeneous structure' but one which has people as active agents, transforming, interpreting, rejecting, distinguishing and classifying the world as they understand it. The historians had to give in by incorporating and coopting the 'popular' in their fold. Perhaps cooption was the only tool remaining in their survival kit.

Not surprisingly, this collection of articles on myriad subjects have a common thread running through them, that of a 'desire to find a way out of the self-constructed cage of scientific history that has

made the historian so fearful of the popular, virtually immobilizing him or her in its presence.' One causative factor, however, in the revisionist drama that Partha Chatterjee fails to dilate on, is the demise of the Soviet Union, which created an ideological vacuum for an entire generation of historians writing from within the fold of the left. The rise of the Hindu Right and fall of the Soviet Union were contemporaneous and perhaps the impact of the latter has been insufficiently explored.

Moreover, despite pledging itself to the idea of 'incorporating within itself an appropriate analytic of the popular,' the task of coopting the popular does not always appear a palatable one. For instance, Chatterjee's labelling of the domain of popular writings, from which the Hindu Right drew its legitimacy, as 'semi-literate' and 'partisan' is itself demonstrative of the condescending attitude that the historians still harbour for the popular/populist writings outside their domain and a reticent realization of the 'loss of the role of the traditional intellectual to act as an arbiter of culture.'

The question that comes up now is, what is the relation of this 'popular' with the 'present'? Why does the discussion veer from the need to incorporate the 'popular' to one on the relevance of history in the present? The answer lies in one recurrent theme of the volume – the modes of temporalization – the ways that different people and communities adopt to deal with their past and their present; where the past and the present both may not always be monochrome but ridden with dichotomies, non-homogenous characteristics and also may not be flowing continuously from one to the other. And where the 'historic' may not be part of the chronological past but a mythical present resting in the womb of memory.

The various modes of temporalization explored in this collection range from myths, ballads, fantasy, genealogies to popular memory. Both Nandini Sundar and Reema Saad look at the genealogies and ballads of peasants of Bastar and Egypt respectively. Nandini Sundar delves into the world of village-settlement stories and genealogies of a village in south Bastar. She demonstrates how these provide an entry point into the present-day politics of the village and also the way they chose to order and relate to their 'historic' past, which was neither flattened nor monochromatic. It was a past that moved on different trajectories of chronological time and lineage time but did not take cognizance of the major regional rebellions, which a scientific historian would never fail to take note of. The concerns of



this past were local and it was preserved in the settlement stories and genealogies, which were not only the site of contemporary village power politics but also served as local archives.

Reema Saad examines the peasant memories of Naseer's agrarian reforms in Egypt and brings to fore two notions of the past, where one is bygone and divorced from the present and the other flows directly from the past into the everyday present. Such an ordering of the past enables the Egyptian peasant to deal with his schizophrenic present where the nostalgia for the bygone is a source of comfort while the other past is an acknowledgment of the need to change with the times.

Prathma Bannerjee, while examining the Santal rebellion of 1855, brings out another kind of present which is distinct from the everyday present. In the lives of the Santal the domain of the mythic time is the repository of action and the actual causal-historical time. The Santal temporalization was made available only when it was performed and enacted in their dance and songs unlike for the Bengali man whose present was bifurcated into two temporalities – one colonial and inhabiting the public domain, the other traditional and domestic. The Bengali man, much like the Egyptian peasant, could retreat to the inner free zone of past existence in time of respite and repose.

Sundar Kaali's essay on the very interesting cult of Vellaikkaran, or a white man wearing jacket and boots, carrying a gun and field glasses, also dips into the ways the local people have tried to order their past through ballads of Vellaikkaran in which the white man is deified. He demonstrates the way the colonized attempts to imagine the 'colonizing other', leading to 'colonial doubling'.

Indrani Chatterjee's essay too covers much the same terrain but deals with the *Rajmala*, which is the verse history of the Tripura Raj. The polyvalent narrative of the *Rajmala* is important for its description or recording of a particular event that 'happened' but 'as a history of ideology and politics of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.' The narrative at one level attempts to paper over internal differences and renders service in assimilation of different peoples within the Hindu samaj structure but at the same time becomes a site from which contest over caste were articulated.

Deepak Mehta's article takes the discussion to a completely different site – the urban slums of Bombay. Through individual interviews, he constructs the Hindu-Muslim riot of 1993. He brilliantly demonstrates the way historiography conceives of the riot 'in

the singular', instrumental terms, obliterating the voice on violence. He retrieves this *voice* from the discursive practice of writing of history by juxtaposing the actual historical event and the informants statements.

Besides a wide-ranging discussion on modes of temporalization, another issue, which the present volume brings up, is the idea of 'alternate history'. A case in point is Shahid Amin's critical re-examination of the 'big story' of the Muslim conquest of North India. He establishes the need for a paradigm shift through a retelling of the narrative of 'Sword of Islam' associated with the martyrdom of Ghazi Miyan. In the ballads of Bahraich and the popular cult associated with him, he is both an Islamic warrior and a protector of cows and has Turks and Ahirs (local cowherds) as his followers. Scientific historians had hitherto attempted to divorce the idiom of conquest from conversion and had shied away from addressing the fact of existence of sectarian strife, leaving the field open for sectarian historians to highlight the conflictual aspects and thereby make political gains. In Amin's view the way out for historians is to address the issue of sectarian conflict and 'to write non-sectarian histories of sectarian conflict.' He further urges for writing alternative histories, which are histories written from within the profession and are ideally available to those outside it as well.

The attempt that Amin makes of rewriting historical paradigms is laudable. However, he fails to tell us *how* it is possible to make what historians write available to those outside the field. Is this not the root cause of the alienation of the scientific historian from the domain of the popular and the sudden haste of co-opting the latter? What historians write is rarely read by people outside their domain and even if there is a change in methodology through self-introspection, does that signify a change in readership, audience and modes of dissemination?

What hope does the new *avatar* of the historian have in front of rabble-rousing politicians and popular writers. No amount of rewriting history and mutations in methodologies can assist a historian in gauging the popular. The real problem is for the historian to have a finger on the pulse of the 'popular'. Chatterjee talks about democratization leading to a loss of the historian's ability to act as a cultural arbiter. But how would the historian assert the right to be a cultural arbiter? A self-assigned role would necessarily be different from one that is bestowed on the historian by the 'popular', and Chatterjee's statement reflects a historian's self-realization of the problem of concretizing this imagined claim.



This is not to say that 'history' and 'popular' shall never meet but for that the historian has to go beyond a mere methodological change. S/he has to adopt an alternative vehicle of expression – the vernacular, publish for popular journals and magazines and introduce in the curriculum the study of popular writings and above all accord a *legitimate* status to these writings.

**Aparna Vaidik**

**A PRINCELY IMPOSTOR: The Kumar of Bhawal and the Secret History of Indian Nationalism by Partha Chatterjee. Permanent Black, Delhi, 2002.**

THIS work of narrative history examines the trial of the Bhawal Sanyasi in the 1930s and 1940s. In the first decade of the 20th century, the Bhawal estate located near Dacca was owned by three brothers known as Kumars. The main event of this story is the alleged death and cremation of the second Kumar of Bhawal at Darjeeling in 1909 and his mysterious resurfacing 12 years later. In 1921, the Kumar returned as a sanyasi and started living in the vicinity of the estate. The estate had by now lapsed into the control of the Court of Wards because the other two princes had also passed away, leaving three childless widows. The sanyasi was recognised and accepted as Kumar by his grandmother, sister and elder sister-in-law, but the Kumar's wife and the colonial authorities declared him an impostor and issued injunctions forbidding him from entering the estate.

The presence of the sanyasi in the area did not go unnoticed by other residents of the estate. If at all, the sanyasi was accepted as Kumar by a large number of tenants of the Bhawal estate. They sanctified their relationship with their lord by celebrating a ritual confirming their loyalty to him. These tenants even refused to pay rent to the Court of Wards, despite threats and use of coercion. The claims of the sanyasi were also legitimated by the neighbouring zamindars who granted him the respect and honour due to the Kumar of a large and important estate.

Eventually in 1930, the sanyasi filed a suit staking his claim as the second prince of Bhawal, expectedly contested by the state. The trial of the Bhawal sanyasi generated great excitement in Bengal. It was an event which produced all manner of rumours and speculation. A large number of these stories were printed and the Bhawal affair produced a variety of literature in the form of pamphlets, poems, satirical verses, doggerel, numerous articles and even books.

By the time the trial began in 1933 in the court of Panna Lal Basu (an Indian judge) the nation was agog. The trial was a long and protracted one; interest was sustained through 608 days of actual hearing in which the plaintiff's lawyers put up 1042 witness and the defence produced 433 witnesses. The witnesses were a diverse lot and came from England, Punjab, Nepal and Bengal. The trial proceedings and the judgement finally consisted of 11327 printed pages of material supported by three volumes of photographs.

The most exciting part of the story was the judgement which argued cogently with substantial proof for the reinstatement of the sanyasi as prince. The judgement was contested by the state in the High Court, but Panna Lal Basu's arguments persuaded the judges of this court and they refused to overturn the judgement. An appeal made to the Privy Council was also rejected. The second Prince of Bhawal had returned from the dead to reclaim his inheritance from the Court of Wards, an amazing story, with all the high drama that it entailed. The sanyasi triumphed and his success added to his legendary stature – a legend which Partha Chatterjee's father loved to narrate, a story which inspired the son to produce the first full length academic work on the subject.

The narrative produced by the scholar scrupulously avoids a sensational retelling and refuses to pass judgement. The title of the book is therefore 'Princely Impostor' and Partha Chatterjee provides a self-avowedly 'positivist' account of the events in which authorial intervention is kept to a minimum. Yet the rendering of the story as an episode in the 'secret' history of nationalism is the author's 'construction'. He reads the story in the context of colonial India of the 1930s and 1940s and argues that the Bhawal sanyasi affair has to be located within the changing power/knowledge network of this period.

Chatterjee demonstrates how nationalist consciousness articulates its resistance to imperial forms of dominance from within the interstices of the colonial state. Nationalist lawyers who argued on behalf of the plaintiff strove to carve out a cultural space for 'Indianness' within the judicial system. This is evident in the manner in which certain cultural practices legitimated the claims of the sanyasi (the fact that the Kumar's grandmother insisted that he perform the last rites for her). The judge accepted these as significant and validated these claims, even though he had to resign his position after he delivered the judgement (because he anticipated problems if he continued to serve his colonial masters).

It appears that changing power configurations as a consequence of World War II favoured the sanyasi's claims because the judges also seemed to be influenced by the prospects of imminent decolonisation. This argument is familiar and in consonance with Partha Chatterjee's earlier formulations about Indian nationalist consciousness and its attempt to carve out a discrete 'spiritual' space for itself within the 'derivative discourse of nationalism.'

Historicising the trial further, the author points out that the Bhawal sanyasi affair, despite its incredible storyline, was not unique. He cites certain instances when other protagonists had also come back in similar circumstances to claim ancestral property, but had been denounced and proclaimed imposters by the judicial system. This supports his argument that the Bhawal sanyasi's success was the product of a particular historical conjuncture, illustrating the significance of 'the conditions when the truth is produced' (p. 105).

The story, a delightful one, is well told, but begs a question: Does the history of the Bhawal sanyasi affair constitute the secret history of nationalism? Where does the secret inhere – in the retelling, in the silence of its judgement, or in the mystery of the sanyasi's identity?

Chatterjee's exercise on the subalterns does not explore in detail the significance of the event for popular imagination. There are many resonances – folklore abounds in such legends – but the author refers in passing to a pamphlet which argued that 'in the age of Kali such an event is required.' The response of the tenants to their Raja is dismissed as utopian and little importance is granted to the evocative power of the Raja turned ascetic. In the historical legends of Bengal the Raja and the renouncer form a powerful dyad. Chatterjee does explore certain indigenous philosophical traditions (why Nyaya only?) for understanding the constitutive elements of identity but again fails to interpret as powerful the motif of 'loss of memory'. This is an important narrative device which could be read as the erasure of 'samsara' and could therefore grant the prince an even more potent persona.

Chatterjee's discussion on how the state structures and constrains individual identities within modernity is persuasive. Certainly 'homogenising' and 'essentialising' of identities is part of the historical process and is apparent in the argument of the lawyers, but the way this story is narrated appears to emphasise the 'secret' of each national culture which lies in the construction of its own 'uniqueness'. The myth of 'uniqueness' and of 'difference' sustains interest in

the Bhawal sanyasi case and thereby helps in its appropriation by nationalism.

An important focus of the book relates to the manner in which the dominant discourse of nationalism constructs 'class' and 'gender'. It is well accepted that elite Indian nationalism interrogated imperial history only in terms of its arrogation of power from the imperial elites; it accepted the understanding that nationalist elites were superior to other strata because they were the 'evolved' groups of the pre-colonial epoch. Elites of earlier periods were, therefore, the 'natural' leaders of the colonial present.

Chatterjee does not explicate this in the context of the story, except tangentially. He could also have elaborated the discussion about how Bibahet Devi (wife of the Kumar) is 'represented' in popular imagination. Her refusal to accept the sanyasi as her husband (to change her status from widow to wife) defies cultural sanctions and makes her a figure who epitomises the 'educated female' whose deracination leads to deviation.

It is evident from the structure of the book that debates about identity do not form the substantive core of the work. The author's intention, it appears, is to tell a story and to tell it well. The primacy of the 'narrative' mode is established and the work clearly amplifies, through its elegance and dexterity, the importance of the 'narrative' for the historian's craft. As Amitav Ghosh asserts, the book is a literary classic and deserves to be read as one.

Vasudha Banerjee

**REMEMBERING PARTITION: Violence, Nationalism and History in India** by Gyanendra Pandey. Contemporary South Asia Series 7, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK, 2001.

CONVENTIONAL narratives of modern Indian history have followed a neat, straightforward trajectory that commence with the year 1757, building up to narratives of the rapid British subjugation and expansion over the entire subcontinent, before the Congress launched its nationalist struggle that culminated in freedom on 15 August 1947. This is where Indian history ends. 1947, however, was more than the definitive year marking independence. As Gyan Pandey argues, it was a rupture – a Partition – that accompanied independence with an unprecedented violence and suddenness.

As Pandey has explained elsewhere, disciplinary history as presently conceptualised is incapable of dealing with violence and suffering.<sup>1</sup> The language avail-

able to the historian and the discourse in which historiography functions do not permit the discourse of ordinary people who live through traumatic events like Partition to be recognised. Rather, such violence is seen as alien to long established traditions and national struggles, as Pakistani and Indian historians have emphasised.

Pandey explains that more than a rupture or a decisive break, there exist at least three different conceptions of 'partitions' that went into the making of the Partition of 1947. The first 'partition' was signalled by the Lahore Resolution of 1940 when an important section of the Muslim political leadership demanded a state of their own—a demand that over the next seven years was taken up and articulated more widely and fiercely by Muslims across the subcontinent. The second 'partition' was the demand put forward in early 1947 by several within the Hindu, Sikh and Congress leadership for the partition of Bengal and Punjab. And finally, there was the feared and then dreadfully realised 'partition' of families and local communities—the third partition that so many people speak of. The historian's apprehension of 1947 is limited to the first two conceptions of partition, leading to a wide chasm between history and the popular account of survivors—the third conception of partition.

For the survivors, Partition was violence but for historians it was in the main a new, constitutional, political arrangement, which did not affect the broad contours of Indian society or even its history. But this other history, based on memories of its survivors needs to be rewritten.

Memory steps in when history fails or refuses to address particular moments of dislocation that societies (communities?) in all their complexity and painfulness often face in their history. It is when history renders violence non-narratable that memory intervenes to give history an additional lease of life. In private memories, and their numbers have multiplied as recent writings on Partition show, Partition is the violence—the day of Partition is the day troubles occurred. In survivor memories, Partition takes on other names—migration, violence, uproar. The choice of nomenclature (partition, migration, etc) as Pandey stresses, determines not only the images that are constructed but also the questions that are asked about historical and contemporary events.

There are historians who have argued to the contrary—on the importance of not studying Partition

1. Gyan Pandey, 'The Prose of Otherness', in David Arnold and David Hardiman (eds), *Subaltern Studies*, Vol VIII, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1994.

violence. For the 'little events'—violence, rape, mass murder and the expulsion of whole communities are the product of other forces, and other processes. Instead, they highlight the need to focus on the centrality of the state, long-term historical processes, the need to reemphasise an enduring aspect of the Indian legacy—the pluralism that has been a characteristic of 'our civilizational ground.' Forgetting is also in the interest of India's unity and the need to forget in the interest of normal interaction between communities.

Should such accounts of violence then, as Gyan Pandey asks, be left only to right-wing writings and their attempts since the 1980s to consolidate a right-wing, rigidly defined religious community based politics? Recounting the violence that accompanied partition of British India—a 'critical (traumatic and repeatedly re-cited)' moment in the establishment of two nation states and the life of their newly constituted peoples—does not automatically amount to telling stories of violence. For while there were reports of mutual support and kindness even at times of great violence, Partition was also a moment which saw changing Hindu-Muslim-Sikh relations; emerging right-wing formations, a state whose attitudes betrayed its increasingly partisan manner and also a growing societal tolerance of violence and brutality.

In the making of the history of any society, narratives of particular experiences of violence too form a significant part. The making of this history takes on a process different from what disciplinary history has often all too easily assumed—that subjects like society, nation, state, community, locality, have a ready fixed existence and that human development follows a natural, pre-determined trajectory.

The violence of 1947 created new subjects and subject positions. Whole communities came to be refugees and the members of an entire population were rendered faceless, undifferentiated, suspect and hunted. It was also followed by a moment of contest and an intense debate about what the character of the new nation state should be; who would constitute its 'natural citizens'? For the Muslims who stayed on (like the Hindus who stayed on in Pakistan-East Pakistan) now constituted a minority problem. The abducted persons who remained on the wrong side of the international border also constituted a different sort of problem—they were conceived of as an impurity or theft or both. The question posed was what would be their place in the new dispensations of India and Pakistan?

After 1947, Muslims were asked to demonstrate their loyalty towards India. Their willingness to 'shed

their blood for India' (p. 162) became a desperate password for citizenship, for being Indian. While being part of a community was enough to deny nationality or to confer it on certain others naturally, for the abducted women, it was in the process of their recovery and restoration that the new nationalisation was decided. In 1947, women who were long considered as having no religion or community or nation, came for that moment to stand for nothing else. Represented as nothing but the possessions of their men, their communities and their nations, many of the abducted women and children became mere pawns and had little say in the cross-fire of nationalist demands that came to mark it.

Subjects are also created in the act of remembering, of reconstructing life and community out of the contradictory and difficult memories of Partition. Reconstructions of violence in the past are frequently forced to grapple with the question of the meaning of this violence for the community – then and now. While nations and states can insulate themselves behind grand, dramatic theorisations about national interests and national agendas, face to face local communities have to live with disturbing memories and have to deal in their own way with their 'non-disciplinary' histories of the painful moment of violence. They are compelled to pose the question of what constitutes the community, the subject of history, 'us' and 'them'. Memories of violence, its discourse constitutes attempts to (re)construct community.

But in such recounting, the violence inevitably happened at the boundaries of a community – 'out there'; violence occurred in a moment when the community faced the threat of disintegration; violence, thus occurs to preserve community, to restore an old one or create a new one. In such a discourse, the violence against women is glorified – tales of bravery of 'our' women and acts of savagery inflicted on others women as part of revenge attacks were carefully constructed and reconstructed largely to restore pride and self-respect in the midst of humiliating circumstances. By acknowledging the violence, such (re)constructed accounts seek to promote the undying valour of the community.

But as Gyan Pandey argues, the reinvention of community is not always easy. The communities thus constructed are necessarily fragile, however much they come to be invoked in the wake of social and political turbulence. Senses of community appear all too malleable, fuzzy, and contextual. Little histories too get transformed in the process of their retelling, in the very process of their construction.

If the 'histories' of Partition, its memories are themselves of a fleeting, re-reconstructable nature, Pandey asks if this history can be written back to also include the dimensions of force, uncertainty, domination and disdain, loss and confusion, the presence of nemesis, that in turn redefined community and life itself. Historians have pleaded for the use of literature to resurrect the 'many histories' of the Partition.<sup>2</sup>

The relationship between violence and community apparent in Partition and accounts of Partition, Pandey insists, still have something unusual to tell us. In times, as 1947, good or evil coexist at the same time and often in the same person; there is moreover doubt as to what is which: what does good society and moral order really stand for. This dichotomy is stark in individual accounts. In all of these, the sheer incomprehensibility of the violence is apparent. These accounts speak of the grave tensions, the ambiguity, the uncertainty and desperation of the time. Everywhere the anguished search for explanation is evident.

The civil servant, while 'sleeping through' the most gruesome incidents of violence still asks what in the Sikh polity allowed the Sikhs to act in this way and *to feel no compunction for it even now* (p. 178, emphasis mine). In another account, a Muslim who had been 'converted' to Sikhism, yet did not reconvert after the 'troubles' asks, 'Why does it always happen in the Punjab?' The same kind of violence had beset the region in the 1980s. His answer (p. 178) is that it is the Sikhs who take arms, go out in *jathas* (gangs) and kill. In Dehlavi's voice, in his despair and need to escape, there is also dilemma and anguish for Delhi had been home, 'even though she (Delhi) had become a dayan (witch), she still remained a mother' (p. 185).

In citing these accounts, Pandey looks at Partition not merely as an event but as a category of understanding a happening. There is a greater need to understand how the tragedy of Partition played itself out, equally important is to understand how it was told and therefore 'made in 1947' and afterwards? The violence is not mere 'local' detail but is central to an investigation of our times, of our future and past politics. Understanding its nuances, its moment, might help redefine and reshape contemporary society and at the same time, effectively pose a challenge to the attempted definition of communities as rigid, 'natural, perma-

2. Mushirul Hasan, 'Memories of a Fragmented Nation: Rewriting the Histories of India's Partition', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 10 October 1998.

ment' entities, as an increasingly vociferous right-wing polity is seeking to do.

Anuradha Kumar

**PREJUDICE AND PRIDE: School Histories of the Freedom Struggle in India and Pakistan** by Krishna Kumar. Viking, Delhi, 2001.

COMBINING scholarship with passion, verve and an engaging pen, Krishna Kumar makes his study of rival Indo-Pak school historiographies what academic books but rarely are: a source of both intellectual and aesthetic pleasure. Lamenting that, whatever its differences within and across the national divide, the entire historiographic production in the two countries, and the often fierce debates around it, should neglect its primary subject – school children – the study focuses on the unrelieved want of concern for children's curiosity and sensibility. Refreshingly unaffected by nationalistic narrowness, it uses three salient features – the politics of mention, pacing, and the conception of the end – to bring out the broad similarities and differences between the master narratives of the freedom struggle that characterize school histories for various kinds of schools in India and Pakistan.

These master narratives are designed to serve the school's function of 'socializing the young into an approved national past, the approving agency being the state' (20). Rather than whet the children's innate sense of wonder and induce them to think for themselves, history teaching is geared to the state-dominated enterprise of schooling the young into a dominant pattern of national identity. The purpose being to impress and indoctrinate, an interpretative approach is spurned in favour of one that provides information – selective information – in a bid to direct national memory (and national amnesia). Following the compulsions of the politics of mention, it decides the what, who and how of national remembrance. The students are filled with convenient facts, not taught the connections among facts. Even when, occasionally, an interpretative approach is employed, it is 'much too interpretative to allow children to relate to it' (100).

What, as instruments of larger national enterprises, these master narratives are intended to achieve is to inject their young with 'a deep awareness of the "other"' (29). Depending upon the ever changing, and mutually reactive, political and cultural climates in the two nation states, the perception of the 'other' may acquire 'a strongly hostile or weakly friendly articu-

lation' (32-3). As a pervasive institutionalised influence, however, the master narratives contribute to the hardening of the negative mindset which has its foundation in the relationship that the two nation states have established between themselves; chosen as they have 'to stay interlocked in a web of unresolved instincts, memories and images' (39).

Two striking examples of the politics of mention cited in the book, which also reflect its author's radical perspective, may be noticed here. Showing that Gandhi in Indian school histories 'remains a frozen figure of greatness', and that this greatness is crafted through striking omissions (167) – 'the politician in him is left out: only the Mahatma remains' (147) – Krishna Kumar exemplifies the point: 'No Indian text mentions that Gandhi substituted the value of loyalty to the state's laws with a self-imposed structure of moral behaviour.' To mention Gandhi's anarchism 'would be inconsistent with the stated educational aim of training children for citizenship' (140-41). Another significant absence, illustrative of the kind of national memory that is sought to be transmitted through school historiography in India, is the non-mention of the historic Poona Pact; it is omitted even from discussions relating to movements of the Depressed Classes (168-69). (Why does, though, Krishna Kumar refer to the pact as one between Gandhi and Ambedkar?)

The politics of the latter absence, and similar others like the non-mention of Moplah killings, stand out in sharp relief against the politics of the Pakistani master narrative which finds use for both the Poona Pact and the Moplah killings. This should not, however, warrant the conclusion that the two rival master narratives constitute mirror images of each other. They, as Krishna Kumar amply demonstrates, are 'different, but in a highly complex manner' (75-6).

The best of his passion employed on behalf of school children, the hapless victims of the historiographic rivalry, and against those responsible for the victimization, Krishna Kumar remains wonderfully indifferent to academic reputations. As an illustration may be cited his remark on the following about Iqbal in Bipan Chandra's Class XII NCERT text: 'In his earlier poetry, he extolled patriotism, though later he encouraged Muslim separatism.' Kumar's remark is: 'How and why Iqbal might have encouraged Muslim separatism becomes so inconsequential in this statement that it might as well have said Iqbal caught a virus in later life' (180). Similarly, the Pakistani school historian Bajwa's astonishing formulation – that 'religion, not allegiance to a community or culture was a

motivating force for nationalism, not just in the Indian subcontinent but in other parts of the world as well' – is pooh-poohed in less than a sentence: 'Without offering an example – obviously because there are none – he [Bajwa] moves on...' (200).

All this brilliance, however, is tempered by a melancholy realization that in both the countries school historians have remained trapped within 'the traditional role of writers of history texts as magicians who show students what all happened in the past but do not reveal the basis of their knowledge' (243).

Realistic enough not to expect, in either country, any systemic reforms in the foreseeable future, Krishna Kumar refuses to end on a hopeless note. His faith derived, perhaps, from the non-governmental initiatives that have brought together a small but growing number of people from both sides of the frontier, he hopes for an 'innovative enterprise' that will bring together a 'handful of schools in India and Pakistan', and 'inaugurate the lifting of what is arguably one of the thickest iron curtains in the present-day world, so far as the flow of ideas and scholarship is concerned' (244–46).

Scintillating as this work is, its brilliance seems to hide a want of logical/methodological rigour. Let me try and voice this by concentrating on the treatment of a binary – the nationalism-communalism binary – that cannot but be pivotal to a study of the historiography of the freedom struggle in India and Pakistan. Krishna Kumar is alert to the difficulty of applying the distinction between nationalism and communalism to a situation where the creation of Pakistan marks, from the two opposing national viewpoints, the consummation of 'nationalism' as much as of 'communalism'. He quotes, apparently approvingly, L.I. and S.H. Rudolph's description of communalism as the 'perceived opposite' of secularism (53), which should justify the acceptance of a similar relationship between communalism and nationalism. But he is also, at the same time, able to observe: 'Even though communalism as a political force is rightly portrayed as being hostile to nationalism, the narrative of nationalism can hardly be disentangled from the record of communal consciousness' (154).

The problem, in this formulation, suddenly ceases to be epistemological. It is no longer an aporia that will admit of no conceptual basis for telling one from the other. Because the empirical reality has them inextricably fused, the difficulty, now, is one of separating nationalism and communalism. Let us concede this difficulty straightaway. Let us also admit that there may be political, normative and even heuristic com-

pulsions for having to distinguish between the two. But none of that can warrant a formulation that reduces the theoretical difficulty of *perceiving* and *naming* to the methodological one of disentangling the phenomena. Where does that leave us in the matter of narrativising the freedom struggle *for* Pakistan? Forget their disentangling, can there be a semblance of consensus about the constitutive elements of the 'narrative of nationalism' and 'the record of communal consciousness'?

And yet, just three pages later, Krishna Kumar observes: 'The sharp bifurcation of the "communal" and "national" is a structural feature of the Indian narrative of freedom. Its conceptual validity apart...' (157). What, then, is the conceptual validity of his own earlier approval of the distinction between nationalism and communalism? And if that approval is valid, for reasons that somehow remain unstated in the otherwise brilliant 250 pages of his text, what is the conceptual validity of his general criticism of 'the Indian narrative of freedom'?

Krishna Kumar, rightly to my mind, is critical of histories that are grounded in a distinction between nationalism and communalism. He cannot, however, give up the distinction altogether. He embodies in this the predicament of all those who, even while seeing through nationalism, realise the need, in the context of their own times, to combat what they believe is communalism. It does not matter to them, in that context, if no impeccable conceptual criteria are available for naming that phenomenon as communalism.

The predicament is reason for grappling with the aporia of distinguishing between nationalism and communalism, or between secularism and communalism. No easy solutions will do. Neither for appreciating how various histories have dealt with the past, nor for dealing with our present difficulties. Krishna Kumar's text reveals little evidence of being informed by an awareness of the aporetic character of the problem. It seems too eager to judge without turning its critical gaze inward.

Two quick final points. First, with his understanding of the subcontinent's identity politics and of the magical efficacy of words, how can Krishna Kumar describe religious identities as 'ethnic'? (170). Its theoretical and empirical indefensibility apart, the description can have harmful consequences, given the current valorisation of ethnicity. Second, what is the rationale for including in the index even those works of 'professional' history which have received only a passing mention, while excluding all the 'school' histories that constitute the staple of *Prejudice and Pride*? The

index will not help any reader who may wish to see how a particular textbook or school historian has been analysed in the book.

Sudhir Chandra

**THE BRITISH ORIGIN OF COW SLAUGHTER  
IN INDIA: With Some British Documents on the  
Anti-Kine Killing Movement 1880-1894 by  
Dharampal and T.M. Mukundan. Society for Integrated  
Development of Himalayas, Mussoorie,  
2002.**

Francis Bacon said that some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed, and some few to be chewed and digested. The book by Dharampal belongs to none of the above categories. He seeks to prove that the practice of cow killing originated during British rule and presents in support of his claim a collection of documents with which serious historians are already familiar. These documents do not prove that the practice of cow slaughter originated during the colonial period. In fact, we have much evidence, both archaeological and literary, to indicate the prevalence of cow killing in ancient times.

Throughout the pleistocene 'bones of the cow/ox have been discovered more frequently and at a large number of places in the river and other deposits than of any other animal.' But even when man in India reached a civilized stage, he continued to kill animals to meet his dietary requirements. Excavations clearly prove that the authors of the Harappan civilization ate cattle flesh of which the relevant archaeological evidence is spread over a vast area covering Sind, Punjab, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Kutch, Saurashtra and coastal Gujarat – a fact which will not be palatable to Hindu fundamentalists who look for 'glorious' lineage for themselves.

The continuity of the practice of cow killing is borne out not only by archaeological but also literary texts. The Vedic and post-Vedic texts are replete with references to the killing of cows in various sacrifices and special occasions including the reception of an important guest. Yajñavalkya's strong preference for tender cut of beef is well known (Shatapatha Brahmana, III.1.2.21) and so is the Upanishadic precept that a person desirous of a learned and longlived progeny should eat rice with a stew of veal (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, VI.4.18): The Manes felt happy for a year if the cow flesh was offered to them (Apastamba Grihyasutra, II.7.16.25; II.7.17.3). In the early centu-

ries of the Christian era, Charaka and Sushruta, and later Vagbhata (seventh century) refer to the therapeutic uses of beef; Sushruta speaks of the pregnant woman's craving for ox meat which he considered pure (pavitra).

The Sanskrit secular literature, ranging in date from the eighth to the twelfth century, provides many references to the killing of cow in honour of guests. Interestingly, when the Brahmins began to discourage cow killing to meet the requirements of an ever expanding agrarian society and refer to it as forbidden in the Kaliyuga, they associated the practice increasingly with untouchables who have continued to eat beef in our own times – in contemporary India out of 450 scheduled castes 104 have a preference for cow beef and 117 for ox beef! Despite the brahmanical disapproval of cow killing they remembered the ancient practice.

Several commentators including Mitra Mishra (17th century) of Gwalior and Mahamahopdhyaya Madana Upadhyaya of Mithila (early 20th century) refer to the old practice without a sense of guilt, and memory sans remorse might as well be nostalgia. Not surprisingly, killing of cows and buffaloes was practised at Todgarh in Merwara (Rajasthan) until 1874 when the local Rawats entered into an agreement to abstain from beef eating. (J. Digges La Touche, *The Rajputana Gazetteer*, II, Ajmer-Merwara, p. 48.) In our own times, a large number of bulls are killed every year at a place called Bhunkhal, 13 kilometers from Pauri (*The Pioneer*, 11 December 2002).

All this is part of Indian dietary and ritual tradition and calls for a detailed critical study. But Dharampal is not concerned with rational enquiry into the past. His objective is to prove that cow killing originated during the British rule, not by critical scholarship but by cashing in on the ignorance of the common man. The Preface and the Introduction (pp. 1-82) of his book is full of sweeping and unsubstantiated statements and glaring contradictions. On p. 2, for example, he tells us that during the rule of Muslim kings the question of killing cows did not arise because they were not there in the land of the origin of Islam. But on the very next page he avers that the maximum number of cows killed in any one year during Islamic dominance would not ordinarily have exceeded 20,000 in all. The ignorance that Dharampal, the Gandhian, is trying to dish out to his readers (with whom I sympathise!) explains the vicissitudes of Gandhism in our country.

D.N. Jha

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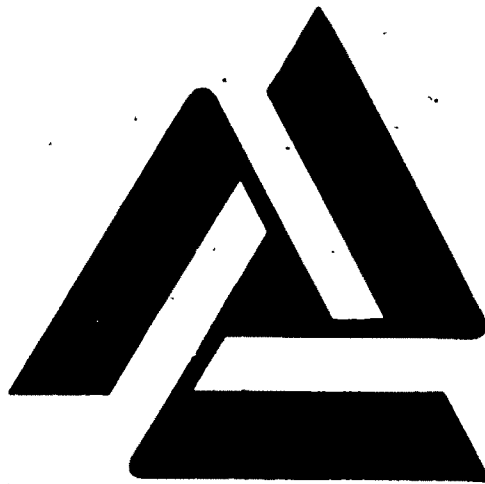
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# Comment

## Gujarat and Gandhi

GUJARAT continues to be in the news in abundance with the eruption of rage and grief expressed at the carnage. The news motivated some to go to those places affected by the carnage; there were others who could not convert their wishes into will – in their case the weakness of will looms large. Of those, some compensated by publishing their feelings to reach those sites of the original news through the same messenger, fastening from the underside the reply mode of letter writing.

One often comes across the parallel drawn between Gujarat and Gandhi in such writings. For instance, eminent human rights lawyer and activist, K.G. Kannabiran, while analyzing the Gujarat developments bemoans and says, 'Gandhiji comes from Gujarat. What happened in Gujarat of 28 February 2002, is not just a negation of what he stood and died for, but was equally a negation of all the values we fought for in the course of our long struggle for independence.' (*The Little Magazine*, Vol. III:2) Many others too have drawn this parallel. While wholeheartedly joining with these voices of protest that justifiably chose the present tense to impart an effect, I want to point out a serious gap in the assumptions

behind this parallel and scrutinize the presuppositions about the past on which the present outcry is based. I would fix exactly opposite aspects in their place while retaining the parallel.

The recent incidents in Gujarat indubitably negate what Gandhi stood for, but what cannot be maintained is the assumption about the historical Gandhi. Though Gandhi stood for non-violence, he was not non-violent by nature. Rather he was a man with strong emotions and feeling – a *rajasik* and not *satvik* by nature. This is evident both in his actions as well as in his writings. His attitude towards his wife while in South Africa, as also his adamant postures on many other occasions bears testimony to his violent nature.

Moreover, I was particularly struck by a recurrent expression while reading *An Autobiography: The Story of My Experiments with Truth*, namely, 'I pocketed this insult, but also profited by it' (p. 72). Similar expressions abound at other places in the book. Unpacking the semantic content of this expression divulges that he did feel the insult, an example of deferred emotions; however, he decided to defer

expressing anger rather than emit it immediately. This facilitates the anger to be put to long-term purpose. In my reading this luminously reveals the basic violent nature of Gandhi. Further, in his axiology between violent action and inaction, he preferred the former to the latter, though he ultimately advocated non-violent action.

Like Gandhi, Gujarat too, given its many cities and the high degree of urbanization, has the propensity to become violent. Central to this social process is a peculiar combination of large-scale migration, insecurity of the displaced people, and their newly acquired prosperity. All these cumulatively and contributively reinforce each other clandestinely, brewing the spirit of violence. It is the violence that was brewed in the cauldron of this new social phenomenon. It is this growing urbanization and the many displaced people outside the organized sector who have been tamed and manipulated, though not created, by the BJP, Shiv Sena and other right wing organizations. In other words, the right wing parties and organizations have not created these social realities but have hungrily wangled at the unattended vulnerable social realities of the new social processes of urbanization. It is thus necessary to distinguish the creation of new social realities from manipulating them. While assigning the latter to the right wing parties I would deny them the authorship of the former.

It is this similarity about the violent nature of both Gandhi and Gujarat, and not the assumption of the non-violence, that should sustain the parallel. While both epitomise violence, Gandhi relentlessly sought to overcome it through constant practice using his body as a laboratory; through constant therapy he tried to become non-violent. This therapy of controlling the emotive and violent gestures also underlies his attempt at revoking the *satyagraha* call given by him when it turned violent. However, unlike Gandhi, Gujarat, which should include us too, failed in a similar exercise.

The failure was in not recognizing the violent nature of urban Gujarat. We failed to recognize and anticipate the nature of the aberrations and discontents of urbanization. This failure was not personal but a theoretical one. It lies in our reading of modernity and its implications. While in the West various studies analyzed the implications, particularly the aberrations of modernity both at individual and social level, we received the process of modernity more or less passively, notwithstanding the warnings by contemporary thinkers. Further, we did not work out different mechanisms to overcome this violent nature so that we, like

Gandhi, could reach the state of non-violence and thereby possibly circumvent this carnage.

The parallel in Kannabiran fastens on continuity with the past, which I contest, not because there is no similarity between Gandhi and Gujarat but because the similarity lies not in both being non-violent but, on the other hand, in both being violent. (One could perhaps have seen the current turbulence of Gujarat in the autobiography of Gandhi.) In other words, the problem lies in conflating an axiom with the conclusion, in freezing the heterogeneous past and the present. This freezing, moreover, at least indirectly, promotes political complacency and escapism.

I interrogate this parallel not merely to make an academic point but to contest this political complacency. What frightens me more is the fact that communal hatred, which was largely an urban phenomenon, has travelled in the opposite direction, opposite to migration, into the villages. This calls for an urgent study of communities in transition in the urban population, to find mechanisms similar to Gandhi or otherwise to overcome this feeling of hatred.

Rather than admit to our failure as intellectuals and social theorists in recognizing the vulnerable nature of new social realities, we have expressed surprise about the happenings in Gujarat. We need to carefully scrutinize the tense in the grammar of individuals and social realities in Gujarat and take processes from the premise to conclusion into serious consideration.

I remember my teacher Professor Ramachandra Gandhi in late Professor S.N. Mahajan's house at IIT, Kanpur, on a freezing winter evening, looking at the picture of Ramakrishna Paramahansa with the rising hand and remarking, 'Does not he look like Ravi Shastri about to spin bowl the ball.' This subtly indicates the need to inject processes into the frozen stillframe. That is, rather than present static stills of conclusion, there is an urgency to bring the Raphaelian emphasis on 'qualities of energetic movements' in social theory.

Hence, our gestures of being politically correct, or assuming the political correctness of Gandhi, should be informed by the (auto)biographies of individuals. It is in this sense biographies of individuals like Gandhi and others can provide invaluable resources to design our political packages rather than indulge in mere political correctness which can, echoing T.S. Eliot, despite our well meaning efforts and intentions, lapse into 'women come and go talking of Michelangelo.'

A. Raghuramaraju

# Communication

THE article by Professor Bhikhu Parekh is really more on 'Bhikhu Parekh's Theory of Hindu Tolerance' rather than on 'Hindu Theory Tolerance' (*Seminar* 521, January 2003, pp. 48-53). I have a very high regard for him both as a person and a scholar but I sincerely think that either his understanding of Hindu tolerance is flawed, or he is also unconsciously a victim of the belief among the intelligentsia that it is somehow fashionable and progressive to unfairly criticize Hinduism. To be fair to him, he faithfully respects the adage that criticism should always be sandwiched between layers of praise, and I believe he is sincere in his praise of Hinduism.

But the damage that Parekh inflicts is very significant. As he says, he steps back from the immediate context of the recent controversy in the wake of deplorable atrocities on minorities by narrow minded mobs of criminals intent on taking revenge. The right course should have been to put pressure on the government to hunt down the criminals responsible for the Godhra carnage, rather than to show intolerance to intolerance in the same style. Even under severe provocation, civilized societies should not resort to lawlessness and insane cruelty. What Parekh does is not condemn particular cases of intolerance; instead, he blames Hinduism itself (though in general, but not in the immediate context). Though not expressed in so many words what he says amounts to charging Hindu tolerance as superficial, condescending at best, and not respectful to other faiths on the basis of equality. Stretched to its limits, Hindu tolerance can easily transform itself into mild or militant intolerance, depending on the circumstances.

According to him, it is not the difference between theory and practice, but due to this weak form of tolerance that is inherent in Hinduism. The author makes his argument on the ground that Hindu allowance for pluralism is assimilative, not of a type that allows others to exist independently on their own with equal respect, but one that allows it only in terms a hierarchy. Because this is so, the moment equality is demanded and hierarchy is challenged, the limits of tolerance are ruptured and intolerance results. The author has said this in an elaborate and polite manner,

hedged with liberal praise, but this is the sum and substance of his argument.

The argument is unacceptable as it is unfair and wrong. Just as the entire Muslim society or Islam cannot be blamed for acts of terrorism in India or the world at large, Hindu society or Hinduism cannot be blamed for particular acts of atrocities against minorities in India.

Scholars of Hindu philosophy and religion have shown that Hinduism allowed independent and separate schools of philosophy and religion, there being no question of their being hierarchically ordered. Apart from theistic schools like Yoga and Vedanta, atheistic schools also like Lokayata, Samkhya, Mimamsa and early Vaisheshika thrived with many followers. Of course, there was fierce intellectual discussion among them, each claiming superiority and trying to vanquish others in debates. This is but natural in any intellectually vibrant society. In spite of this richness of debate, it is surprising that Bhikhu Parekh approvingly quotes Al Biruni to say that there was very little dispute around theological topics. The debates and disputes within Hinduism were as rich as in Buddhism, and probably more than in western religions. A look into various books on Indian philosophy such as those by S. Radhakrishnan, Surendranath Dasgupta, M. Hiriyanna, J.N. Mohanty and Hajime Nakayama demonstrates this point. As Koenraad Elst has observed: 'Hindu India has also had no history of book burning, of executing heretics or confining dissidents to lunatic asylums. The Buddha could preach his heterodox doctrine till his old age without ever being persecuted' (Elst 2001: 30). Buddhism vanished from India not because of Hindu persecution or even assimilation. Nalanda and such Buddhist universities, which were strongholds of Buddhism were destroyed by Muslim invaders when Buddhists were killed or converted in large numbers to Islam, especially in Bengal and Bihar.

Regarding treatment of minorities, Parekh cannot be unaware of the several privileges they enjoy in India that Hindus do not. It is the minorities who are the first among equals in secular India, not Hindus. Minority run educational institutions qualify for state grants, but not those run by Hindus. The

former can have their own admission policy in spite of it. Muslims get a subsidy for Haj trips while Hindus have to give special taxes at pilgrim centres to cover security expenses. Minorities have their own special personal laws, whereas in a secular country all should have been under a common civil law (see Elst 2001:524-583).

If anyone points out these anomalies of our secularism he is at once branded as a communalist or a fundamentalist. India is not, and will not be, a Hindu state and rightly so. And this is due to the tolerance of Hindus, even if you call it condescending tolerance. As Elst put it, Hindus are damned if they do, and damned if they do not (Ibid: 97). The best refutation of Hindu intolerance of minorities, including Muslims, is provided, as Elst point out again, by the fact that the constant trickle of Hindu refugees from Pakistan and Bangladesh is not matched by a similar trickle of Muslim refugees from India. On the contrary, there is a vast movement of Muslims migrants from Bangladesh illegally settling in India (Ibid. p. 69). Recently the home minister of India pointed out that thousands of Pakistanis legally entering India do not return after the expiry of their visas.

Much is made of the hierarchical Hindu society, as if there was no such hierarchy in traditional societies elsewhere in the world. Several eminent socio-logists have pointed out that the caste system, contrary to what was commonly thought, permitted upward mobility, that what we have are *jaatis* which are not hierarchical, and that they should not be confused with *varnas* (see, for example, Srinivas ed. 1996; Gupta 2000). The contribution of the so-called lower castes to Hinduism has been so significant that it is erroneous to call Hinduism as Brahmanism (Nadkarni 1997).

Parekh is again wrong in his finding that as per Hinduism *jnanamarga* is the most superior (as yet another instance of the Hindu tendency to order every-thing into hierarchy?). Philosophers have accorded different preferences to the different paths to God. While *jnanamarga* is the most superior according to Sankaracharya, it was *bhaktimarga* according to Ramanjua and Madhva, *karmamarga* according to B.G. Tilak, and an integrated yoga combining all the three according to Aurobindo. It is interesting that just as there was no unique hierarchy among paths to God realization there was no unique or universally agreed hierarchy among *jaatis* too.

Yet another example can be given to show how Hinduism permitted diversity and pluralism without

any attempt at hierarchical ordering. This is with respect to the bhakti movements of medieval India. Almost every region of India witnessed bhakti movements. It was not one movement, but many. Each had its own favourite god, each had its own founder saint and each created its own rich literature and in its own regional language. And yet amidst all this diversity and pluralism, there was unity without any one person or church or ecclesiastical order trying to achieve it.

Bhakti movements simplified, democratized and humanized Hinduism as never before. They also showed that Hindu assimilateness does not homogenize but allows different sects and beliefs to maintain their separate identities without any hierarchical ordering. Such vibrant creativity has been continuously witnessed in Hinduism from the Vedic period right up to the present. Contrast this with other religions which had and still have hierarchically ordered, lavishly financed, centrally managed ecclesiastical orders expanding their territories, wiping out differences in the name of purity and giving little peace to non-proselytizing religions. If Hinduism could hold it own against such aggression, it is because of its inherent strength, flexibility, creativity and tolerance of differences.

If Bhikhu Parekh finds that Hindu tolerance has limits, and that it is not infinite and absolute, there is nothing wrong or unnatural about it. Gandhiji himself said that tolerance of injustice, unfairness and intolerance is cowardice, and not *ahimsa*. It is, however, necessary to ensure that even intolerance of intolerance does not stoop down to lawlessness and barbarism. If under some extreme provocation, it did so, it is certainly not because of the preaching of Hinduism, which has always valued truth and nonviolence above everything.

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# Backpage

THE contrast could not have been sharper. As its entry into the new year, the NDA government, particularly the BJP, confidence bolstered by its electoral victory in Gujarat, organised the first ever conference of People of Indian Origin (PIO). The gathering of over 2000 representatives of the diaspora unsurprisingly foregrounded ethnic patriotism based on a glorified rendering of our civilizational past. The focus was as much on attracting capital flows as leveraging the growing importance of the diaspora in the countries of their residence.

But even as this meet demonstrated a rising self-confidence in the Indian elite and its desire for a more influential role in world affairs, the irony was lost on no one. A regime, which in its political imagination remains deeply troubled with its Muslim and Christian minorities, regularly demanding loyalty tests from the former, saw little contradiction in expecting the PIOs to advance Indian interests. And, as a sop, it was willing to consider dual citizenship.

But even as Delhi was showcasing the glories of ancient Indian (Hindu) culture with help from luminaries ranging from Amartya Sen to Sir Vidya, a very different mix of Indians were seeking to construct their own brand of internationalism in Hyderabad. For five days in early January, the city played host to an unusual gathering of social movement activists and public intellectuals. The Asian Social Forum—over 10,000 individuals drawn from political and social movements, mass fronts of political parties, NGOs and networks, and from a range of countries—came together to demonstrate that 'Another World is Possible'.

True the ASF was an organisational nightmare, not unexpected given the mammoth challenge of arranging travel, accommodation, visas and, above all, the social space for hundreds of panels and performances. Nevertheless, to just have pulled it off without major glitches (barring the disappearance of M.F. Husain's painting loaned for the occasion) with no help from the administration and to have discussed a bewildering range of concerns from capital flows and speculation to religious identity and nationalism is no minor feat. More so, since it was the first attempt by an Indian non-party, non-government alliance to host an international gathering.

Unlike the Delhi conclave with its focus on attracting capital and leveraging a 'muscular and masculine' India to promote an aggressive nationalism, the ASF sought to challenge both state nationalism, seen as

engendering insecurity both internally and externally, as also the logic of capitalist accumulation which destroys both nature and community. Central to the political imagination of the ASF, in fact all anti-globalisation struggles and movements, is the contestation of the growing hegemony of right-wing neo-liberal economics and politics, the foregrounding of capital over labour, and the shift towards a new social Darwinism.

Possibly this is why Hyderabad was the chosen venue. The city is touted as Cyberabad, its attention directed towards a Singaporean future with roads, lighting, flyovers, parks and telecommunication connectivity benchmarked to international standards. Of course, in this project there is little space for the hundreds of cotton and tobacco farmers, the weavers and the fisherfolk who are committing suicide in desperation, their livelihoods destroyed by rampaging capital and insensitive public policy.

Nevertheless, questions remain. Are events like the ASF and the enthusiasm of the thousands who gathered foredoomed to remain marginal, with little real possibility of influencing policy outcomes? Ever since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the socialist project, and the growing influence of the US, its allies, MNCs and multilaterals like the World Bank, IMF and the WTO, the space for smaller countries, communities and peoples to plan their strategic responses has shrunk. Equally with politics, even democratic, electoral politics becoming a corporatist enterprise, the common citizen is being alienated from public engagement.

That is why a mere reiteration of 'politically correct' slogans and a gathering of the marginalised and disaffected will no longer do. Without acquiring political weight such that both mainstream parties and state power are forced to accommodate the articulated concerns, events like the ASF will remain a colourful sideshow. It is instructive that even the left, despite the presence of its mass fronts and ideologues, formally did not own up the meet.

The challenge, in these ideologically confusing times is to not only move beyond the state vs market or local vs global binaries but to evolve institutional arrangements that provide creative engagement space for community and civic concerns. Just as the citizen has to be more politically active to be heard, formal political entities have to turn more civic. Only then will another world become possible.

**Harsh Sethi**

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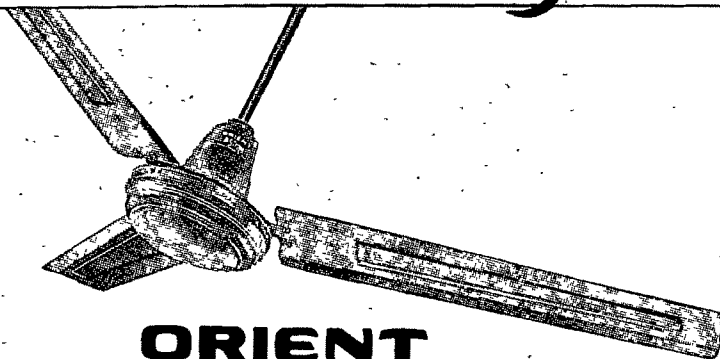
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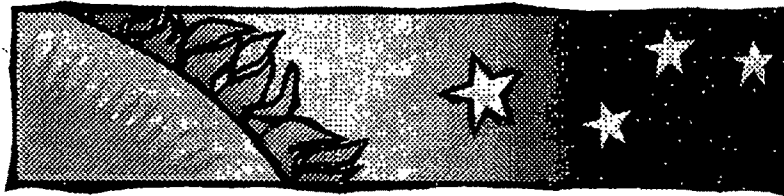


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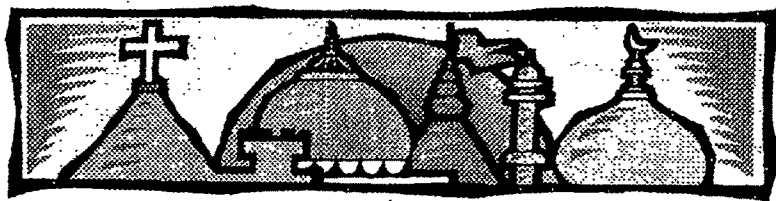
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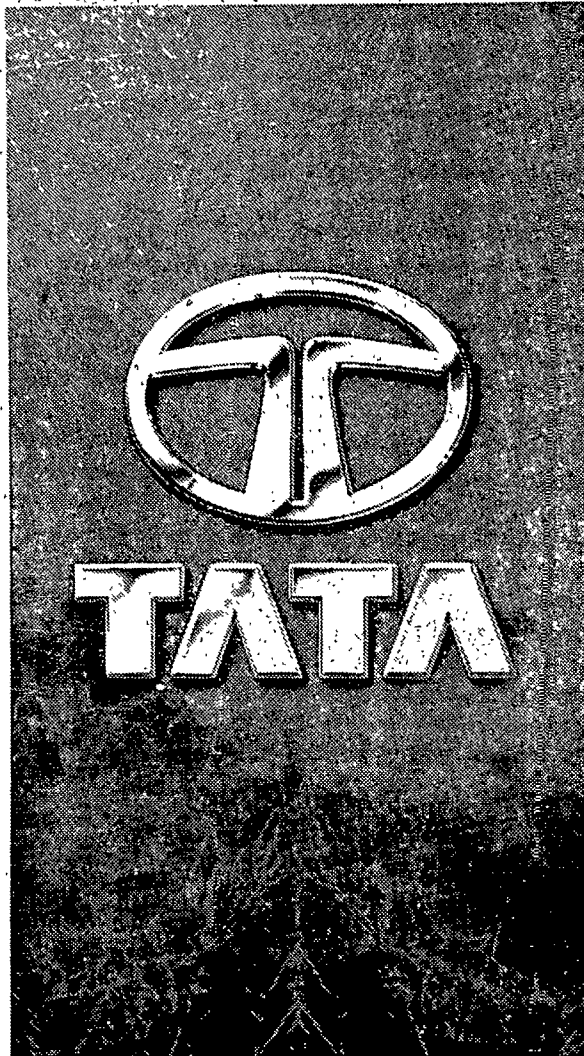
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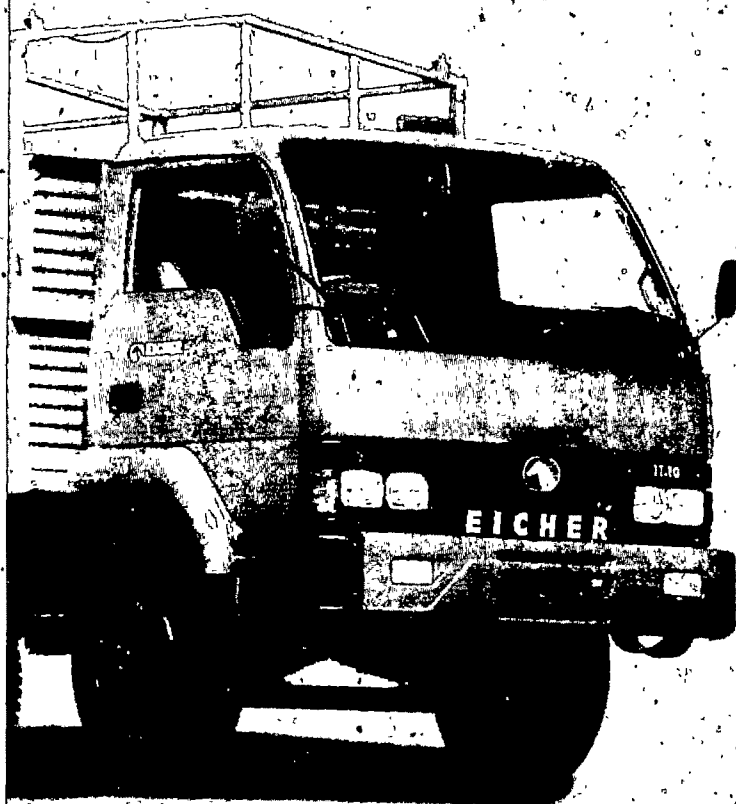
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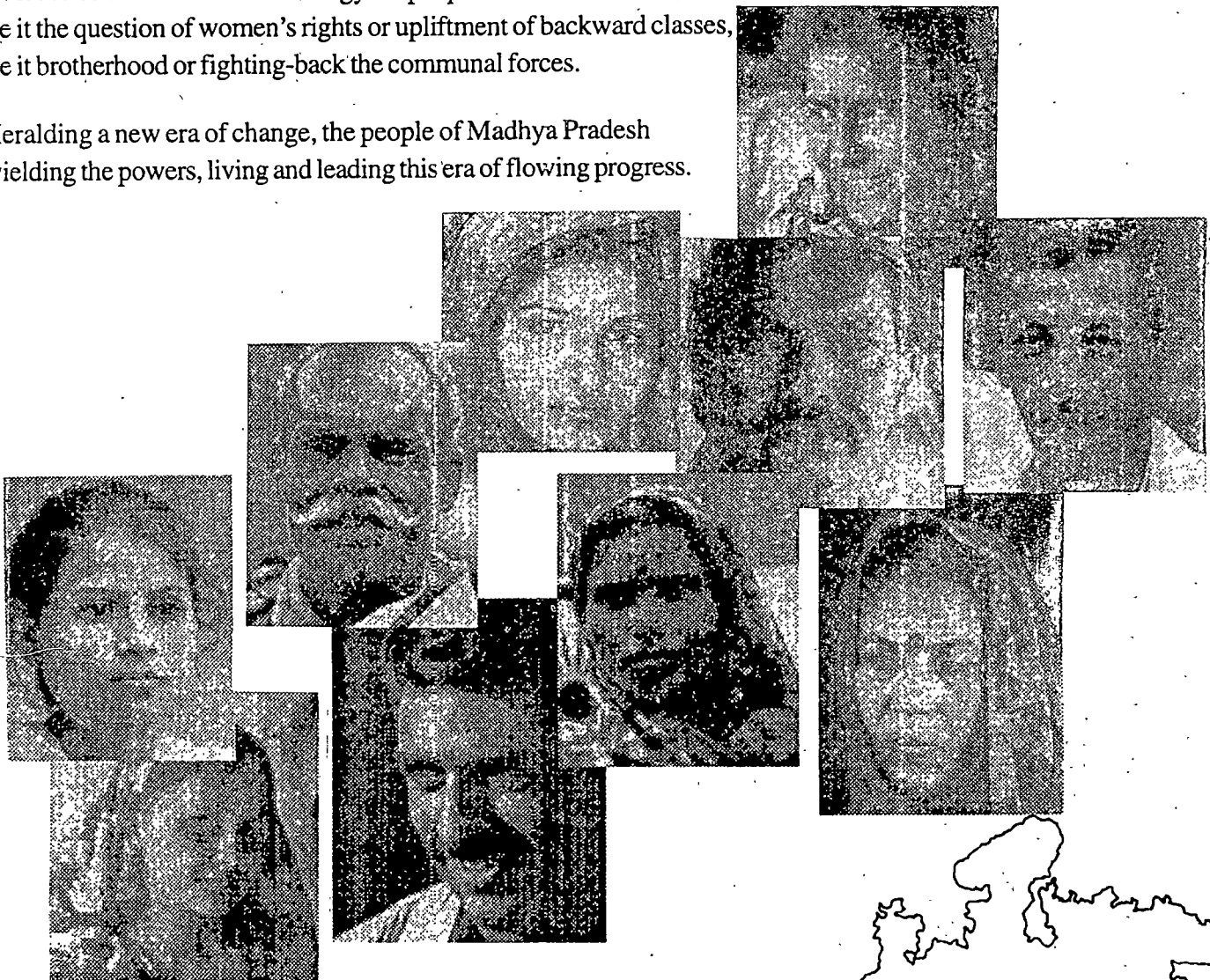
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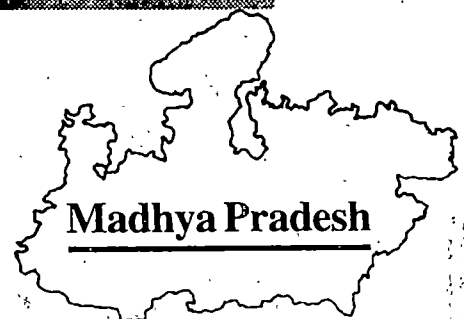
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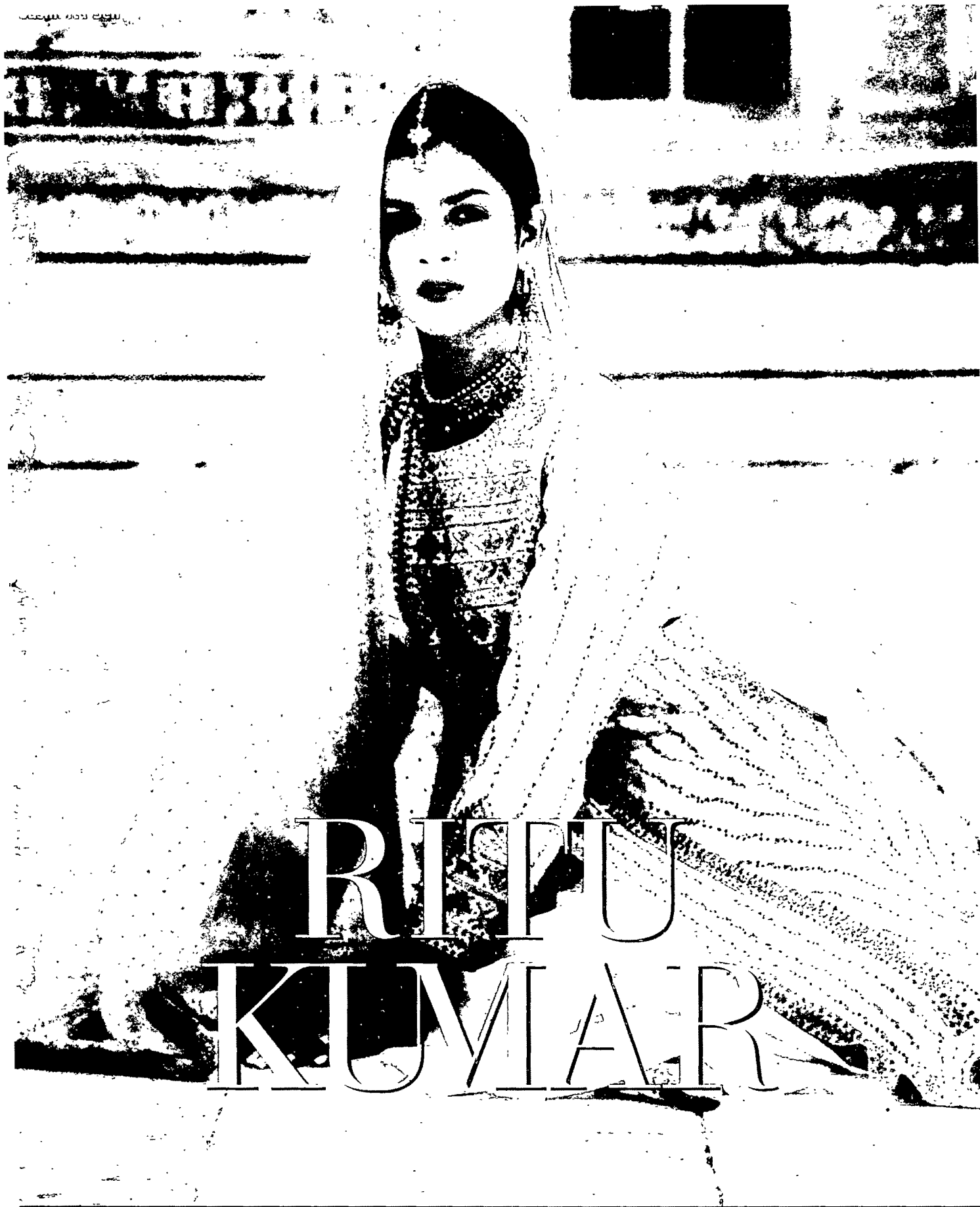
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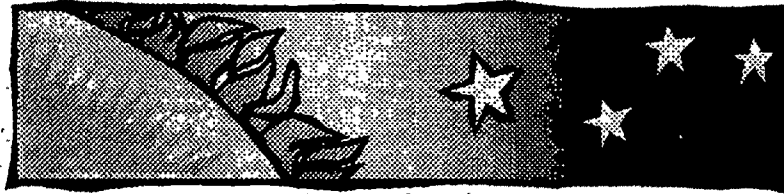




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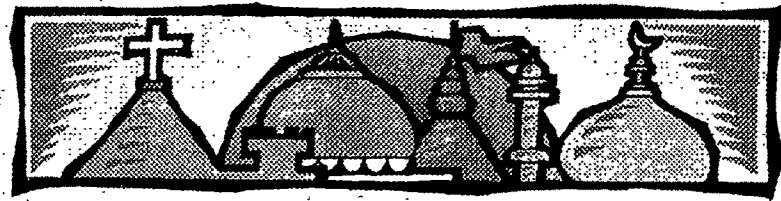
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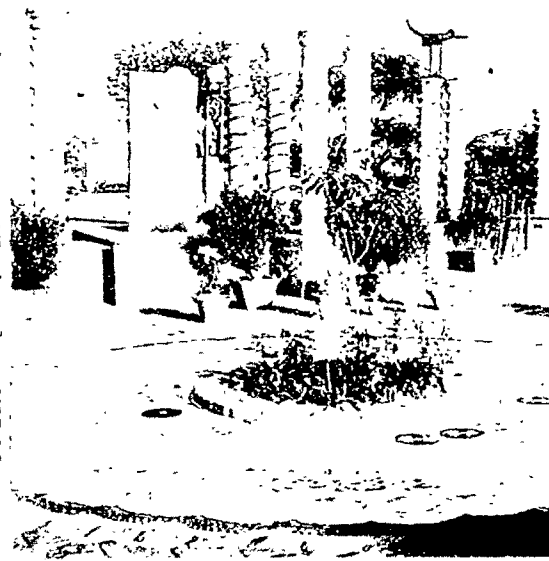
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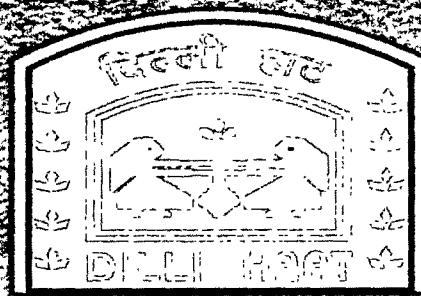


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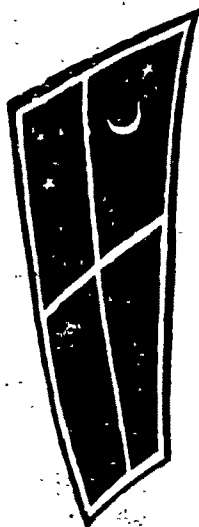
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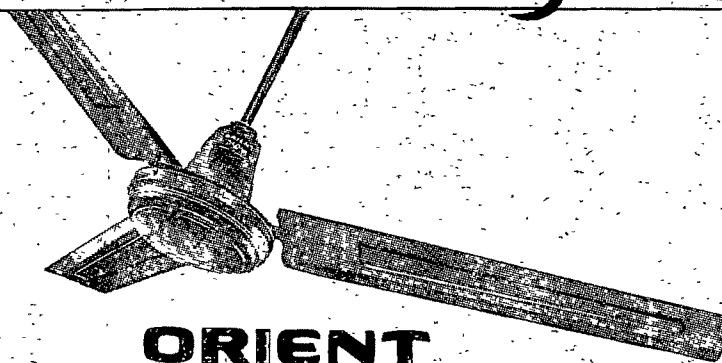
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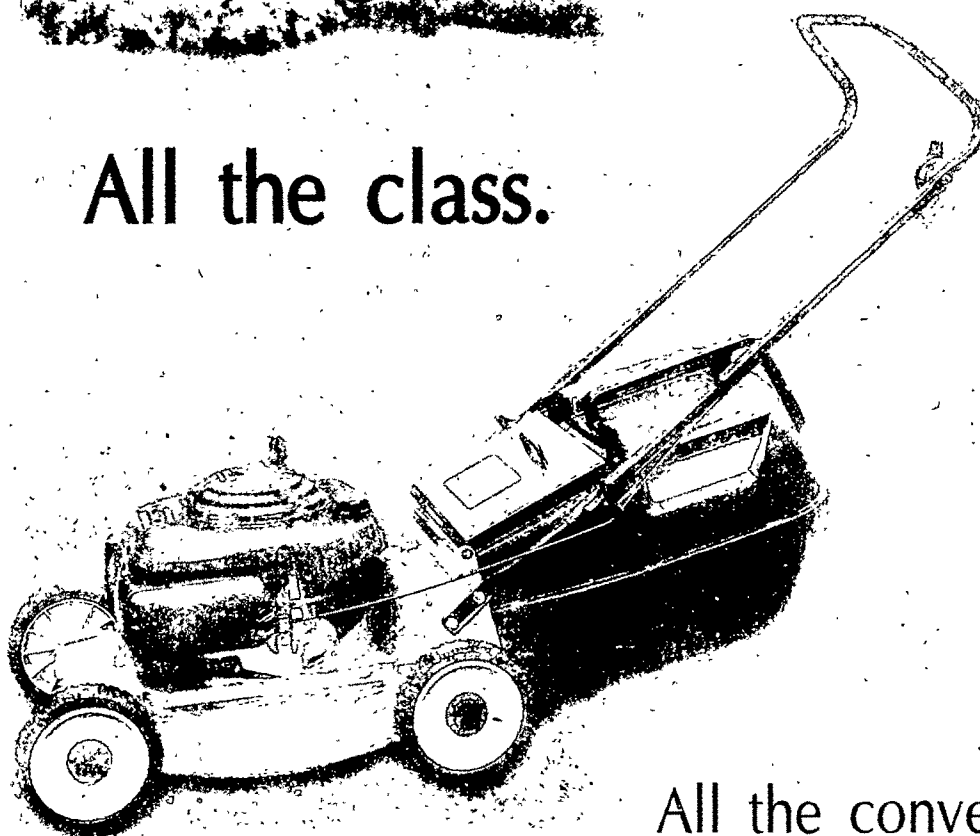


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publisher MALVIKA SINGH

editor TEJBIR SINGH

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circulation N.K. PILLAI

-46 Malhotra Building, Janpath, New Delhi-110001: Telephone 23316534; Fax 011-23316445; E-mail seminar@vsnl.com  
single copy: Rs 25    Yearly: Rs 250; £35; \$50    Three year: Rs 700; £95; \$140    Reproduction of material prohibited unless permitted

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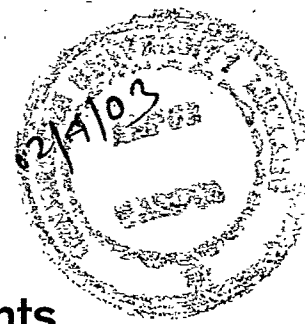
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a symposium on

the state of

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## The problem

*'Our lives hang on the thread I embroider.'*

Ramba Ben, mirrorwork craftswoman,  
Madotra village, Banaskantha.

'IT'S lovely stuff, but it doesn't really work economically, does it?' said the young *Business Standard* journalist covering one of our Dastkar craft exhibitions. For the average consumer, craft is perceived as a high-maintenance, high-cost product that neither wears nor functions as well as its industrial equivalent; for the craftsperson craft is a profession that neither gives adequate economic returns nor social status. 'It's the grave pit, not the loom pit,' says a handloom weaver, his grim summation borne out by recurring headlines of starvation deaths of handloom weavers in Andhra. 'They are so skilled; why doesn't anyone train them to make electronic spare parts?' asks a Dutch diplomat of the Kutchi mirror work embroideries at another Dastkar exhibition.

Last year India celebrated the golden jubilee year of the resurgence of Indian handicrafts. Major movers and shakers of Indian handicrafts from all over India – both government and non-government – were in a three-day seminar that was part of the celebrations. Its theme was the status of master craftspeople and sustainable development. It honoured and included ten master craftspeople to whom the President presented the newly instituted title of shilp guru.

In this context, it seemed significant that while the names of all the speakers, moderators and rapporteurs were listed in the programme, the names

of the shilp gurus and shilpajana in whose honour the seminar was held were not listed – they were clubbed together, as craftspeople always are, seen as one unified entity, undoubtedly culturally interesting and picturesque but without individual personalities, needs or voices.

It also seemed significant that when they did break out and express their (sometimes critical) views, and tell their (often sad) stories, the wish list of these extraordinary, fast vanishing repositories of creativity and culture was not some transcendental new millennium for craftspeople, but such small things – railway passes, a pension, respect (rather than requests for bribes) from clerks in government offices, free entry to the museums that store their work... that what they most remembered in their lives was not some landmark leap of craftsmanship or international recognition but the warmth of Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay's smile 50 years ago. It tells us so much about their current status – their perceived value of themselves. 'I have received many awards, but I still work on the footpath,' said one.

In India, craft is a cultural and creative manifestation; it is also a mainstream commercial product. This duality is a source of strength, a reason craft (and over 10 million craftspeople) have survived into the millennium; it has also caused confusion and conflict.

Government policies and public attitudes to craft have often found it difficult to decide which side of the mirror is the true image that should be fostered and nur-

tured. The outcry of craft purists when Madhubani painting was put onto fabric and turned into sarees and soft furnishings, the fact that cane wastepaper baskets and bronze votive sculpture are sold under the same government emporium roof, the fact that tattered old pieces of tribal embroidery sell for a higher price than identical pieces made contemporaneously, the fact that the National Crafts Museum was first under the Ministry of Commerce and then under the Ministry of Culture, and now once again functions within the Ministry of Textiles, all highlight this dilemma.

To add to the confusion, craftspeople themselves – despite there being over 14 million of them – are not active players, either in policy-making or marketing craft. The actual players represent many different interest areas; many of them mutually incompatible. To cite only a few: to cultural historians, tradition and motif are sacrosanct; to commercial merchandisers, consumer demand and global market trends are the determining force; for government policy-makers, India's huge craft sector is a dead weight that has to be subsidized and supported till its workforce can be amalgamated into the organized, industrial sector. To Gandhians and grassroots activists, making, wearing and using craft represents a way of life and an ideal of Indianness, while they resent the need for commercializing and packaging it. For the tourist trade and the rest of the world, Indian crafts and craftspeople are a part of picturesque, storybook India, but also a wonderful source of cheap products and cheap labour,

sadly wrapped in the red tape of government rules and regulations.

Luckily the size and scale of the sector, its inherent vigour and great variety, enable all these different elements and strategies to operate simultaneously. As a result, Indian craft is still alive and (somewhat feebly) kicking.

For every much-mourned dying craft, there is a resurgent new one – *theyva* gold filigree, lost wax metal casting, glassware. The rough goats wool shawls of camel herders in the Thar desert is transmuted into stunning daily wear. *Phulkari* flickers, but Mughal gold brocade weaving is gloriously resplendent once more. The sarees of Patan, Chanderi, Siddhipet and Dharmavaram are ghosts of themselves but *bandini*, *maheshwari*, *pathani* and *bomkai* sarees of a quality unseen for 50 years are magically reappearing. Tussar, eri and muga silk flourish again, and khadi metamorphoses from limp KVIC-subsidized penal wear into a fashion statement.

Terracotta and lathe-turned lacquer takes over the Indian home in dramatic new shapes and usages, tribal *dhokra* and bell metal are part of the global marketplace. *Sujni*, *suf*, *lambani*, *kantha*, *chikan* and *zardozi* embroidery ornament elite homes and wardrobes. Rural India may take to plastic chappals, but the urban young espouse *juthis* and *kolhapuris*. Vegetable dyes have become a fashion statement.

Similarly, and much more importantly, for every starving Andhra weaver, there are new emerging

craftspeople. Everywhere – Tilonia and Urmul in Rajasthan, the SEWAs all over India, Kala Raksha, Sandur, Berozgar Mahila Samithi, Adithi and Anwasha in Kutch, Karnataka, and Bihar – the energy of a source of new employment and earning binds together and revitalizes communities that were as deprived and denuded as the desert around them. This is particularly true when one works with the latent skills and strengths of women. They suddenly discover their self worth, seeing themselves as active participants in the community rather than passive recipients of welfare. Wells are dug, children educated, social prejudices and taboos are thrown away when women discover their own power.

It's extraordinarily exciting and moving to see the traditional hand skills of women, used to craft products for themselves and their families, gradually changing into a contemporary, urban, market-led product, but still strongly reflecting the cultural identity and individual skills of the makers. It also tells the story of women, subtly changing themselves in the process. The process is not without conflicts, but it is invariably catalytic. Like a kaleidoscope, familiar elements, transposed, take on a new, dynamic pattern.

In Ranthambhore where Dastkar has been working for the last 12 years, the local doctor says he can recognize a Dastkar craftswoman from half a kilometre, just by the way she walks. Methods of birth control are canvassed along with colour combinations; old women learn that writing their names is no more difficult than threading a needle. The women have set up their own savings and loans micro-credit group. They are now moneylenders to the whole village.

In Kutch, after the devastating 2001 earthquake, craftspeople, without insurance, provident funds, or social security, were the worst hit. Government figures estimated that 2,28,000 artisans were severely affected by the quake, losing their families, their homes, and their livelihoods. Nevertheless, ironically and significantly, they were also among the first to recover – through the inherent skills in their hands. As Ismail Bhai, a master craftsman and block printer in Kutch, said to us: 'All we want is the means to stand on our feet again; we will rebuild our own lives ourselves.'

In Lucknow the first 12 SEWA chikan embroidery women, black *burkha*-ed, illiterate, earning about 100-150 rupees a month, house-bound and totally dependant on the local *mahajan* have grown to seven thousand – with an annual turnover of over Rs 30 million! They travel all over India, happily sing *bhajans* in a *dharmasala*, or cook *biryani* at the Bombay YWCA. They march in protest against dowry deaths as well as

Islamic fundamentalism, demand financial credit and free spectacles from the government, self-confidently refuse to give either Sanjay Singh or Mayawati a discount! They earn in thousands rather than hundreds, and have thrown away centuries of repression and social prejudice along with their *burkhas*. And chikan itself has been transformed and re-born in the process.

The combination of men and women is a creative and essential part of the craft process, as it is in the fields and the village and in the life of the family. The shift in the balance of power within the family and the changing perceptions of the community to women as they become earners, mirrors the transitions in the craft as it reaches out to wider, new markets. As women find new strengths and freedoms, men too find their minds and horizons expanding. The process is not without conflict, but it is invariably catalytic. It illustrates Dastkar's belief that the continuing existence of an extraordinary diversity of craft traditions and producers is one of India's unique strengths as it searches for its own identity in a world that is increasingly uniform and technological.

But paradoxically, while craft traditions are a unique mechanism for rural artisans entering the economic mainstream for the first time, they also carry the stigma of inferiority and backwardness as India enters a period of hi-tech industrialization and globalization. Craft and the ancillary aspects of design and tradition are considered by activists and economists, bureaucrats and business strategists as decorative, peripheral and elitist – rather retrograde ways of earning a living. Craftspeople are always seen as picturesque exhibits of our past, rather than dynamic entrepreneurs of our present and future.

We forget that one out of every 160 Indians is an artisan. Hand craft is a production process and a wonderful, indigenous technology, not an outmoded tradition. Their raw materials (cane, cotton, clay, wood, wool, silk, minerals) are not only indigenously available but also environmentally friendly. The existence of unique living craft skills, techniques, designs and products is India's great strength, not a weakness.

Since independence, numerous committees, commissions and task forces, both governmental and non-governmental, have sat to evaluate and strategize the future of Indian craft. Reports have been written, action plans have been drawn up. The Planning Commission, SIDBI, NABARD, KVIC, the AIHB, UNDP, the World Bank, the Export Promotion Councils, the Directorate of Tourism, and other national and international agencies, all recognize the importance and

potential of this vital part of the rural and non-formal sector. But there has seldom been a meshing together of all the different perspectives.

To those of us now looking at the new millennium and seeking new directions for Indian crafts and craftspeople, it is important to create a common base for our strategies and speculations. We may be celebrating 50 years of so-called handicrafts resurgence, but let us not lose sight of the fact that every ten years we lose 10% of our craftspeople.

Part of this required introspection is in examining the successes and failures of the past in order to create a programme for the future. Mapping the last five decades – from the Gandhian legacy of the '50s and the creation of our craft institutions – CCIC, the Khadi Bhandars, the All India Handicrafts Board – the time when handloom and *khadi* were a proudly worn symbol of our newly found freedom; through the '60s when Riten Mazumdar, Ratna Fabri and Nelly Sethna handcrafted a new Indian identity and Cottage was the look of contemporary India; through the '70s, when bureaucracy and commerce replaced idealism and mass-produced Moradabad brass and Kashmir papier-mâché marched side by side with the commodification of rural folk arts like Madhubani and Worli. The Festivals of India of the '80s: showcasing India abroad, and the emergence of NGOs and craft melas in India: Vishwakarma, Adithi and the UK, US, and French Festivals of India. Sasha, Dastkar, the SEWAs, Tilonia. The ikat and 'ethnic' boom.

The '90s saw the emergence of multinational labels and the global marketplace. Suddenly consumers were presented new choices: Benetton and Nike versus mirror-work and kolhapuris. The impact of liberalization and cable TV, dwindling raw materials and rising transport costs, meant that the Indian market was no longer a level playing field for craftspeople. (Master craftswoman Sona Bai now has to walk 20 kilometres to get bamboo.)

So now – in the new millennium, while craft remains India's amazing living cultural heritage, can it also be a sustainable career? 14 million-odd craftspeople still practice craft, both as a living tradition and as a mainstream economic activity. Craft is still everywhere, from the pavements to kitchen utensils to the fashion ramp, rather than tucked away in a museum or esoteric studio revival. Some of it is kitsch and tacky, some of it singing and beautiful, some simply functional and ordinary. But craftspeople themselves are increasingly marginalized, their average earnings well below the stipulated minimum wage.

Pupul Jayakar, the doyenne of Indian crafts, once said, 'Craft is an economic activity before it is a cultural activity. The centre of the development process is marketing.'

Globalization and liberalization have changed the face of the Indian market and the psyche of the Indian consumer, putting new pressures on the craft sector and small producers. These new pressures need a new perspective. If traditional craft techniques and their producers are to survive, they cannot remain static – locked in mind-sets, production systems and marketing strategies that are now outdated. NID, NIFT and the fashion ramp have given value-addition to craft, but have they also alienated it from its roots? Many feel the anonymous, timeless continuity of Indian craft, changing organically in response to consumer needs and usages, rather than designer-led, was its strength – alas, now fast disappearing. How does one get craftspeople back into the creative process?

Given that most NGO interventions in the craft sector have either an economic or socio-cultural base, and that crafts themselves can be both a functional commodity and yet a cultural symbol, a failure to classify craft properly lies at the root of much confusion and failure. Focal needs get confused, inputs get diffused. As the veteran shilpi, Parameshwar Acharya, indignantly spluttered, 'They lump us together with cobblers and pot makers!'

Working in a craft community, we need first to identify and classify both skill and product. Where change (in material, function, technology, or market) would benefit the craft, and where it would inextricably do damage. Having established the core value-system and context of the craft we should not cross this line. Training and sensitization of NGOs and government staff working in the sector to these issues and the cultural and technical aspects of the crafts with which they work is crucial. Finding new opportunities to suit the taste of the contemporary market without compromising traditional aesthetics, while leaving space for individual creativity and cultural meaning, is the test of a successful craft intervention.

We need also to be aware that there is often a conflict, when buyers wanted products tailored to current trends, or lower prices. Simultaneously, we cannot ignore the need for alleviation of poverty, or the need to create more employment. 'We want work, work and work. If we have work, we live. If we have work, we eat. No work, no future,' reminds Rani Bai, a craftswoman from Anternes village in Gujarat. Therefore, part of our role is also to sensitize the buyer. Crafts

are not just part of our aesthetic and culture, they are the bread of life to millions of craftspeople.

However, we should also be sensitive to the fact that not all crafts and skills are immediately viable. Where there is a need, there is not necessarily a potential. Stockpiles of unsold goods made in good faith lead to disillusionment and further hardship, while subsidizing the unsaleable alienates the consumer. Strategies need to be long term, with marketing infrastructures to support them.

Nirranjan, the skilled young *kalamkari* master from Shrikalahasti told the story of government agencies coming into the area and training women to do *kalamkari*. Nobody asked the already embattled traditional craftspeople, increasingly finding it difficult to find buyers for their existing pieces, whether there was a potential market for all these new, not so highly skilled products. NGOs are equally guilty of this *mai-baap* syndrome.

We often voice our frustration at the lack of motivation and passive dependency encountered in working with craftspeople. Why is it that this gargantuan sector, with quite literally countless millions of craftspeople, has not thrown up more craftspeople who are leaders, activists, raisers of issues, movers and shakers of a system that often works against their best interests and heritage? Sadly, NGOs and people like us, supposedly sensitized to the importance of crafts and craftspeople, generally still work *for* craftspeople, rather than *with* them.

Part of including craftspeople into forums like the shilp guru seminar, or into more mainstream planning and organizational decision-making, is first empowering them to feel confident enough to speak, to suggest, to disagree, to actually direct directions. Lots of us get upset about the so-called 'commodification' of craft; we need to be equally sensitive about not treating craftspeople as products rather than persons.

The urban intelligentsia and craftspeople both need to break the caste system of city vs village, literate vs non-literate, and book learning vs traditional skills.

Craftspeople have been brainwashed into believing that educated English speaking city graduates have solutions and insights to which skilled traditional craftspeople cannot contribute. The NGO becomes guru, father figure, patron, and source of income. Even when they perceive our feet of clay, a combination of traditional politeness and fear that our patronage may vanish prevents them from disagreement.

Crafts organizations, (both government and non-government) make numerous rationalizations for not

including craftspeople as part of their decision-making and implementation: language, logistics, differing cultural time frames, the traditional passivity of rural communities, age-old harsh economic realities which have led to a lack of both hope and initiative, including craftspeople in financial decision-making would lead to 'confusion' and misunderstandings, craftspeople not having a long term perspective or understanding 'issues'. I think most of us are aware that these are pretty lame excuses!

The fear of losing control may be a subconscious but a very real factor. We even interpret their own crafts to them. 'Every craftsman is a designer, not every designer is a craftsman,' was one shilp guru's sardonic reminder. Few NGOs teach or encourage craftspeople to become designers. There has been much talk of local museums where artisans could draw inspiration from the best of their own traditions; nevertheless most crafts collections continue to find urban homes in metro cities. Kala Raksha is a shining example of how a local documentation centre has acted as a catalyst for craftswomen to move from piece-wage earners to creative artists.

Craftspeople must be integrated into every aspect of the development process. There is a need also to find alternative models for such local initiatives. There is no a blanket module. The traditional guild had too many hierarchies, and the government-sponsored cooperative has become a dirty word – a synonym for corruption and mismanagement.

We must all introspect on and develop steps needed to prepare and include craftspeople into those implementing and decision-making mechanisms that concern them – building on the strengths rather than weaknesses of each craft and craft community, and being sensitive to their different nuances and cultural consciousness. Economics may be the driving need, but social, cultural and familial concerns must also shape the direction and decision-making process. We need to take the craftspeople with us. Learning to listen as well as speak is something we all need to learn. There must be a shift from patronage to partnership.

Ganapathi Sthapati warned us on day one of the shilp guru seminar (apropos of western vs Indian traditional culture), 'If we don't tell them they will tell us.' We could do well to turn this on its head and reflect that if we don't listen to craftspeople, a time may come when they won't be around to listen to us.

LAILA TYABJI



# Rethinking handloom

UZRAMMA

THE cotton handloom industry of India is one of the great manufacturing institutions of the world. Beginning with fragments of woven cotton material found in the ruins of Mohenjodaro, going on to supply the world with cotton fabrics from at least the time of the Roman Empire, and from then up to the end of the 18th century, there are testaments to the quantity, quality and variety of Indian cotton fabrics scattered through written records. Pliny, the Roman historian of the 1st century AD calculates the value of the cotton fabric trade between India and Rome at 100 million sesterces (equal then to 15 million rupees) every year, and complains that India is draining Rome of her gold.

Suleiman, an Arab trader who visited Calicut in 851 AD writes in his diary '...garments are made in so extraordinary a manner that nowhere else are the like to be seen. These garments are ...wove to that degree of fineness that they may be drawn through a ring of middling size.' The trade in cotton cloth was the main source of India's fabled wealth. Tome Pires, a Portuguese traveller of the 16th century writes in 1515 from Malacca describing the ships that came there from Gujarat and the Coromandel coast, '...wortheighty to ninety thousand cruzados, carrying cloth of thirty different sorts...' Pyrrard de Laval in the early 17th century says Indian cotton fabrics clothed 'every-

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one from Cape of Good Hope to China, man and woman ... from head to foot.'

It seems important to remember this history of quality and quantity when today Indian fabrics hold a mere 2.5% of world textile trade, behind China, Pakistan and Turkey, and the main item of export is the cheapest 'grey sheeting', made on powerlooms, and in which we are competitive only on account of the low wages we pay. And since textiles still provide about a third of our exports, in order to maintain even this undistinguished presence in the world, we now need to import textile machinery from Japan and Switzerland. Is this really the best that we can do; is this the direction that we have chosen in the 21st century for the once-famed cotton textile industry of this country?

**T**here can be an alternative to this dismal prospect, based on the recognition and encouragement of the handloom industry. Today we have the only substantial household-based cotton textile industry in the world, and as part of that we have a huge skill-bank in the millions of people capable of weaving and of making the looms and accessories. We grow our own cotton and make our own yarn. These circumstances can be the foundation of a large and sustainable textile industry in the 21st century, an industry that can supply both domestic and foreign markets, without dependence on imports for knowledge, machinery or raw material.

The handloom industry is dispersed in villages and towns, avoiding the pollution and ghettoization of concentrated production that we see in powerloom centres. Many of the producer regions are closely linked to their local markets, others such as Chirala in Andhra supply distant but specific markets through complex trade and credit linkages. If this com-

bination of factors can be seen as the tremendous asset that it is, and if policies can be framed to encourage and support the strengths of the handloom industry, we have an unparalleled opportunity to develop a textile industry of which we can justifiably be proud.

Cotton is a fibre that, of all the textile raw materials in use – wool, silk, linen, or synthetics – requires the largest number of operations to convert it from its raw state to fabric. At the same time, in a temperate climate it can be grown with the least amount of energy. Our indigenous technology, closely adapted to the nature of the fibre, produced in the past cotton fabric of a staggering diversity that was durable, strong, light in weight, absorbent, washable, and that held colour permanently. This industry at one time employed millions of people at each stage, from the growing of the plant through the ginning, carding and spinning, the warping, sizing and weaving up to the dyeing, bleaching, printing, finishing and finally the trading of the cloth.

**T**oday, to begin with ground realities, at the dawn of the 21st century, handloom production is still the largest employer in the country after agriculture, employing twelve and a half million weaving families, not including the loom and reed makers, dyers, warp-winders, sizers and other specialists who supply ancillary support. Weaving is not confined solely to traditional weaving castes: when the industry thrives in one region, many other non-weaving castes take it up. In Kurnool district of Andhra Pradesh for example, where weaving was introduced for income generation in the aftermath of natural calamity in the 1950s, it is practiced today by traditional fisher and toddy-tapper castes and by Muslims.

Apart from its formidable size, the other great strengths of the handloom industry in common with other craft industries are its low overheads and capital needs, its variety and regional specialization, its versatility and adaptability, its independence of generated power and of imports, and its smooth skill transfer mechanisms. The other side of the picture is the lack and weakness also common to artisanal industries: an absence of institutional support for credit, research, technology, management and market development. What the handloom industry has which other craft industries are struggling for, is a domestic market cutting across the social and economic spectrum and the urban/rural divide: cotton handloom fabric is still worn and used by Indian people of all kinds and classes.

This tenacious preference accounts for the increase in handloom production over the years. Though the percentage of handloom as a part of textile production has dropped from 24% in 1980-81 to 20% in 1999-2000, the actual production has gone up from 3109 to 7352 million square metres. (By the way, during the same period, mill production has dropped from 36% to 4% and output from 4533 to 1714 million square metres. The figures are from the Compendium of Textile Statistics 2000, published by the office of the Textile Commissioner.)

**I**n an era of globalization, where we face floods of imports of textiles from both China and the US, the regional specialization of handlooms is a critical factor that provides well-defined product identity, something sought after at great cost and effort by the modern consumer industry. Here we have an undoubted advantage, one that is conceded even by those who want to cram the huge elephant of the handloom industry into the small

bottle of the niche market. Orissa Sambalpuri, Bengal jamdani, Gujarat lèheria, Maharashtra Paithan, Andhra ikkat, the triple ply silks of Kanchipuram, the list is endless. New specializations appear from time to time, like Manglagiri bordered fabric that swept the country in the 1960s and is still going strong. Identities of handloom fabrics must be respected, protected, reinforced. Why does the government stand by and allow the intellectual property rights of handloom producers to be violated through the large-scale duplication of handloom products by powerloom?

**S**pecific regional products find specific niches in foreign markets. One particular textile, the modern version of the Real Madras Handkerchief, itself a mutant of the traditional Andhra telia rumal is highly prized in Nigeria as a ceremonial fabric. In its heyday in the late 20th century up to early 1995, 15000 looms in the Chirala area wove this one fabric alone for the Nigerian market. With an average output of three metres a day and 200 working days in a year, at an ex-loom price of Rs 75 per metre, this adds up to an annual production of nine million metres of the value of Rs 675 million – or over \$13 million American dollars – of just one product, for just one niche market, from just one mandal. These are substantial figures by any standard. But no effort has gone into creating transparent information flows between buyers and sellers, with the result that the weavers don't know what the fabric is used for, or even through which channels it goes from Chirala to Nigeria, and the product is being copied by powerlooms. The number of looms has now sunk to about 2,000.

The rise and fall of the Real Madras Handkerchief carries hints of past glories and future dreams. It is

also an indictment of our capacity for mismanagement, showing how we fail to build on our particular capabilities and circumstances. With a little initiative from the state, such as appointing a marketing professional for this specific product, who would find out and report back to the producer base on who are the end-users, what they want, and how they can be supplied, the weavers of Chirala could make enough RMH to wrap the moon in, solve Chandrababu Naidu's debt problem, and have time left over to advise the academic fraternity on how to generate employment in rural areas.

A myth exists that handloom fabrics are more expensive to produce than powerloom or mill fabrics. This is the argument used by those who see handlooms as suited only for an elite niche market. True, mill-made synthetic fabrics today are sold at a fraction of the cost of cotton handlooms, but the hidden costs of this production, such as disease-causing pollution and the social cost of industrial concentration need to be factored in when calculating costs, as well as the cost of electricity generation.

**T**aking into account power tariffs, which are, by the way, looming factors in the current powerloom recession, the handloom is a cost-effective mode of textile production because of its low capital costs, its independence of power and of import components, and the environmental and social advantages of dispersed production. As newer and more expensive technologies are introduced in the mechanized sector, the cost of the product of the mechanized sectors will increase. In the context of globalization and liberalization, dispersed modes of production employing low-energy processes can have high viability.

The variety and price range of cotton handlooms runs the gamut bet-

ween the very expensive fine fabrics woven for the Indian elite and Japanese museums, and ordinary household linen and homewear for ordinary people. Like the disparity between the users, the disparity between these products is enormous – one could be easily be a hundred times the cost of the other, a towel at Rs 20 a metre and a chanderi, jamdani or gadwal sari over Rs 10,000. In between are the clothes and household textiles used and worn by urban professionals, and by the middle class, preferred for their greater absorbency and the inimitable fall and drape of handloom cloth.

**U**p to now, entrepreneurs in the area of cotton handloom marketing in urban areas, coming from traditional weaving (for example in Andhra and Tamil Nadu) or textile trading (for example in Bengal) backgrounds, have tended to follow one particular route, restricting their interest in cotton handlooms to the high value fabrics which would give them high returns through relatively low volumes. At the lower end of the marketing spectrum the thicker, ordinary, everyday cotton sarees that large numbers of rural working women demand, the bedsheets, towels and lungis, are made and sold through local rural networks of local master-weavers many of whom run their own production units.

The gap to some extent has been filled by cooperatives, supplying local markets as well as urban users with good quality cotton fabrics at reasonable rates. But well-working cooperatives are few, and here there are great opportunities for contemporary entrepreneurship, in devising new marketing channels to exploit the specific characteristics of contemporary handloom production of the huge volumes of medium priced, good quality cotton fabrics of medium thickness,

suitable for dress materials and household linens.

There is no reason why attractive design and colour should be confined to the upper price bracket. On the contrary, it is possible and practical to have diversity and specificity also in thicker fabrics, at the lower end of the price spectrum. In fact, it is the ordinary thicker fabrics that not only supply local needs but are also the ones that cater to the foreign export markets. It is these fabrics that have potential for both domestic and foreign markets, rather than complex weaves and fine fabrics. The great advantage of these plain fabrics is that they are made by large numbers of weavers, and this production can expand with little need for costly infrastructure development. In spite of the fact that these fabrics are outpriced in the market by powerloom fabrics and by mill-made synthetics, it has been clearly demonstrated through the continuing existence of this ordinary, medium-priced handloom segment that there is a firm demand for these fabrics on account of their better durability, absorbency, comfort and 'feel'. Most 'powerloom' production is sold under the name of handloom.

**A**t the same time we need models for workable collective institutions controlled by the producers themselves, on the lines of the dairy coops and self-help groups now burgeoning in the country. With such independent groups it is possible to develop a production base that will be responsive to the preferences of the market, and to link up this production base to the market through new marketing mechanisms. These new combinations will enable fresh entrepreneurial talent to emerge at different points in the production-marketing chain.

The design aspect of production, like market access, raw material sup-

ply and finance, is today in the hands of the trader-entrepreneur. It is he who gives the yarn and finance, and also dictates the design to the producer family. Being concerned to make the best use of his investment, the entrepreneur restricts his colours and designs to the fast selling items, thus effectively strangling the infinite variety that is the greatest strength of handloom production. The current understanding of design operates to buttress the importance of the niche market, where the specialized product is the prerogative of a small elite, while the large 'mass market' must be supplied through mass production systems producing large numbers of undifferentiated products.

**A**ttempts to fit household production into a mass market that is designed to deal with large quantities of mechanically produced identical goods has had the effect of characterizing the unique qualities of handwoven cloth as 'inferior'. When, on the other hand, handloom fabric is sold on its merits rather than as a competitor in the mass market, variation in weaving is part of the character of the fabric, and not a defect. The role of the designer in the production/marketing chain has to be restructured so that it supports and strengthens a large and dispersed producer base, rather than strengthening market forces geared to mass production.

'He who controls cotton controls weaving,' as an old saying goes. The true potential of handloom weaving will be realized if its decentralized mode can be supported by the decentralized production of cotton yarn. Currently, handloom production of cotton textiles is dependent for its primary raw material on spinning mills that primarily cater to the needs of machine spinning, and only incidentally to handlooms. The underlying

assumption here is that there is no difference between the yarn needed for machine weaving and for the handloom. This is untrue. The greater speeds and higher warp tensions of mechanical weaving need a strong yarn that can withstand the stress, while the slower speeds and gentler operation of the handloom can use yarn with less twist, which can be made on slow speed ring-frames from local short-stapled cottons.

**M**odern high speed spinning mills need cotton varieties specially grown for their staple length, and produce yarn with the high twist necessary to withstand the strains of mechanized weaving. The combination of the new hybrid cotton varieties, bred for the characteristics needed for high-speed machine processing, and the effect of that mechanical processing, destroys or lessens the particular qualities that made Indian cotton fabric so famous in earlier times: the lustre, colour-holding capacity, absorbency, softness and durability, which are preserved through the slow speed spinning and weaving of local cotton varieties. All government sponsored research into the breeding of cotton varieties since independence has followed the lead of the research initiated in this country by the East India Company in the 18th century, to produce yarn specifically suited to machine weaving. The emphasis has been on the Hirsutum or American varieties brought in by the Company, replacing the traditional *desis*. Now even the research is going out of our hands, with the introduction of Monsanto's patented varieties.

It would be no great difficulty for the cotton research establishment to develop some cotton varieties specific to the needs of handloom weaving of each region. This could be done in conjunction with the development of technology for local small-scale

processing from the ginning to the sliver-making, which would eliminate the need for baling and the blowroom processes that are inevitable for baled cotton. Baling made sense when cotton had to be transported over the sea from India to Lancashire, but is unnecessary when cotton weaving and cotton cultivation are geographically close to each other. The baling process compresses fresh, clean, soft, naturally aligned cotton lint into a bale as hard as a block of wood, which has to be brought back to its original clean, soft condition with all its fibres parallel, through a highly energy-intensive combination of blow-room and carding processes.

**T**he cotton used today is mostly of the Hirsutum variety or its hybrids, bred for its higher yields, shorter maturing times, and longer and stronger staple. But these varieties tend to have at maturity around 20% immature fibres. Combined with the damaging processes of baling and unbaling, the green fibres tend to clot together into tiny lumps in the yarn, called neps, which again need elaborate processing to eliminate. High speed spinning and weaving need work tensions that make the yarn and resulting cloth stiffer and less elastic. Cotton varieties on the contrary bred for high levels of maturity combined with slow speed spinning and hand-weaving would give us cotton cloth with excellent dye-holding, absorbency, elasticity and durability.

The issue of technology is often raised at the mention of the relevance of the handloom industry in a contemporary context: isn't the handloom an outdated technology, and wouldn't weavers be better off without the drudgery of loom operation? The technology of the loom has the advantage of being affordable by and accessible to large numbers of people who have

no other work options. In the year 2000 the number of looms in the Yemmiganur mandal of Kurnool district in Andhra rose sharply. The reason was that in that year four local businesses – the oil mill, the transport company, the spinning mill and the leather industry closed down, throwing thousands out of work. Four thousand of the newly unemployed set up their own looms to weave a popular textile – the Gadwal saree. The 21st century has seen no growth in employment in the Indian industrial sector, and for millions, particularly in villages, handlooms continue to provide the only possible livelihood.

New technological improvements constantly take place in handloom weaving. In the 19th century the fly-shuttle was introduced replacing the traditional throw-shuttle, and in the 20th century the warping wheel has been invented, which can lay 20 warps in the time it takes to lay one. Roller beams on which longer warps can be wound, and gears to ease the take-up motion are now used in some weaving centres. These technologies are manageable by weaving clusters, weaving organizations, and individual weavers. Enthusiasts of new technologies often forget that technology management is a critical aspect that should be within the capability of the user.

**S**ince the 18th century, technology has most often served the mercantile interest, geared to increasing productivity, which does not necessarily benefit either the worker or the user. Powerlooms, for example are often quoted as a better alternative to handlooms. The output of a powerloom is certainly several times greater than that of the handloom. But studies show the life of a powerloom operator to be a wretched one:

'Is the life of a powerloom operator an attractive one? Working and living

conditions are wretched... The workers derive no security at all from their employment... their monthly income is dependent on the degree of self-exploitation that they achieve during a twelve-hour day or night shift... They are all debarred from allowances and fringe benefits that secure the lives of workers in the formal sector. As single migrants, the majority of men are separated from wives and children who stay in the villages and to whom they send a maximal part of earnings whenever possible. In 1984 this averaged less than 100 rupees per month... three-quarters of them live in accommodation of less than 49 square feet; a quarter even has to make do with nine square feet... I have visited a number of these billets, so small that the eight, ten or even more inhabitants could not all be present at the same time. They sleep in turn...' (*Footloose Labour* by Jan Breman, 1996)

**I**ncreased unit productivity mainly benefits the trader, often at costs which are not immediately obvious, to society and the environment. Handlooms can give us huge overall volumes of production, from a dispersed production base. New technologies should serve the interests of the producer, as well as of the user of the product. A new direction for technology could be charted that serves the interests of stable and sustainable production and of society as a whole. In support of handloom weaving, technical research to develop decentralized cotton processing could be taken up. Development of local varieties of cotton and local processing into yarn would further accentuate the regional identities of handloom fabrics.

And finally, in the era of globalization, implying both transparency and participation, the policy-making exercise of government relating to

handlooms should involve responsible producer organizations, and be based on detailed field studies. Handloom weaving is as diverse in its operations, in its relations of production, as its products, and this is often not taken into consideration in making recommendations: We speak of *the* handloom weaver, we use aggregate data to compare and contrast the handloom industry with mills and powerlooms.

Aggregate data does not reflect the radical diversity of handlooms in forms of organization, production patterns, or types of product, in each state, region and district. Past policies have fallen into this error and have proceeded to establish and strengthen institutions based on it. As a result these institutions are seriously flawed, and have suppressed constructive initiatives attempted by primary producers themselves, as field experiences show. By looking only at these flawed institutions, we tend to see a picture of starvation and gloom.

**O**n the contrary, there has been growth and innovation both within and outside the cooperative sector that gives us clues regarding the potential of the handloom industry in the 21st century. It is in the context of a new role for the state in the liberalized economy that we need to look more closely at the positive aspects. In some weaving regions in recent times, phenomenal growth has taken place, where new technologies have been taken up, innovative marketing has been developed, or cooperatives have been successful. The role of the state in the new dispensation should be to encourage and support existing success stories as well as the efforts of primary producers to form their own organizations, through promotion of direct access to credit and market for these groups, and through active, detailed, specific and

serious research undertaken on their behalf.

The mistake the state has made is to look at the handloom industry as a basket case, in need of welfare, with state commissioned reports harping on the theme of the 'poor weaver'. It is true that the condition of the weavers is pitiable, but we need to examine in depth the reasons for the marginalization of the skilled production force of a vibrant industry. The primary producer in the handloom industry is the greatest asset not only of the handloom, but also of the other branches, both 'powerloom' and mill, of the textile industry of the country. It is his and her skills that have provided the bank from which the labour capital of all branches of the textile industry has been drawn. The household mode of production is the cradle of these skills and needs to be supported and nurtured as such. With a fraction of the support that the state extends to other branches of industry, the handloom weaving industry can be the powerhouse of rural revitalization in the 21st century.

#### Notes

The experience and research on which these claims for the household cotton textile industry of India are based are located in the following groups:

The PPST (Patriotic & People-oriented Science & Technology) Foundation, AU-PPST Centre, Anna University, Chennai 600 025: an independent body that undertakes research into indigenous knowledge and indigenous production systems.

Dastkar Andhra: a funded NGO that is actively involved in promoting sustainable rural livelihoods.

Independent Handloom Research Group: an informal association of academics and others, based in Hyderabad.

Contacts are maintained and these groups undertake joint research with weaver organizations based in Andhra (particularly the Rashtriya Cheynetha Karmika Samakhya), Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Uttar Pradesh, and with individuals who have taken up historical and technical research in related subjects.

# Threads of life

MAGGIE BAXTER

SHRUJAN started as a small family project, and now has a network of over 2500 craftswomen spread across 85 villages. This achievement would have been remarkable *per se*, but in the difficult terrain and climate of Kutch, it is an additional triumph of will and determination over adversity.

Kutch lies in the northern-most part of Gujarat. The character of Kutchi people is formed partly by the unique and isolating geography of the area. To the north and east, Kutch is surrounded by great salt marsh desert areas: The Great Rann and The Little Rann. To the south and west lies the ocean, which was for many centuries the main route to the rest of the world. The land is very hot and arid; at worst, droughts occur year after year.

The traditional life for many Kutchi people was one of being nomadic or semi-nomadic pastoralists. Although most have now settled into villages, the agricultural and pastoral cycles still dominate the structure of their working lives. At the same time, the 360 km of sea coast, blessed with many natural harbours has ensured a long tradition of seafaring activity. This uncertain lifestyle meant that many women were left for long periods of time to raise their children and maintain the continuity of village and family life. Consequently, Kutchi women are a very strong force within the social structure.

Embroidery is one of Gujarat's most celebrated and splendid craft traditions. From the 16th century onwards, the region developed a range of professional, trade embroideries which were exported throughout the world. In parallel, this area has a rich

material culture of domestic embroidery that has been handed down from mother to daughter for generations. For the women, embroidery is more than a practical, decorative medium for household goods; it is an important means of personal, social and religious expression. Each tribal group and community in the area has its own particular style, lexicon of stitches and motifs.

When a new wave of commercial activity entered the region in the 1960s, it was the domestic rather than the professional artisans that took on the work. Their inexperience in the ways of the business world, combined with the modern emphasis on speed and quick profit, sometimes led to lower standards and loss of fine skills.

Under Chandaben Shroff's leadership, the Shrujan organisation has worked to reverse this downward spiral, restoring skill levels, while at the same time introducing new design opportunities and business training to the women doing it.

In 1969, Kutch experienced a particularly severe drought. Chandaben went there to assist with a famine relief project. During this trip, she noticed the wonderful, local embroideries, and realised that they could be modified for the urban Indian markets with great benefit to the women. After asking the Ahir women of Dhaneti village if they would embroider saris, she persuaded various members of the Shroff family to give small amounts of sponsorship money to buy silk and threads. She then went back to Kutch to plan and work with the women. One woman, Parmaben, was appointed as the village supervisor and placed on a monthly salary at

the same rate as the men for working in the fields. For this, she had to draw freehand designs onto the saris, distribute the work to and from other craftswomen, help with embroidery training, handle the accounts, and send the completed work to Mumbai.

All the other women were paid on an equivalent daily basis. At first, it appeared inconceivable to the Ahir women that they could actually earn money from embroidery and drawing designs. No one before had considered their skills to be financially viable. Now they were.

**T**he women were equally incredulous that the fashion shades of threads that Chandaben gave them could be sold to any one. In their opinion the colours that she had chosen were much too insipid and tasteless, without enough spice and drama. Not surprisingly they rebelled, but were eventually cajoled and persuaded, and production went ahead.

The first exhibition of saris was held in October 1969 in Mumbai with considerable publicity and retail success. The profits were immediately reinvested into the project, and so it grew. By 1974 the sales were national, and in 1982, they held their first overseas exhibition in London. Despite the initial success, Chandaben had to face detractors and doubters. Some members of the buying public were disappointed that the threads were silk and not nylon; exporters approached her trying to persuade her to lessen the quality of work for quick production and profit; some friends and acquaintances advised her that the first sale had been a one-off success, solely because of her business and social contacts.

But throughout, Chandaben never wavered from her vision that the work would only be sold as status items and that the women would be afforded the respect they deserved as

fine artists and artisans. This original concept was both revolutionary and farsighted but at the same time firmly located within a strong philosophical framework.

As followers of the Sri Ramakrishna Mission, Chandaben and her husband Kantisen observe the teachings of Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda: 'Religion is not for empty bellies... it is futile to preach religion... without first trying to remove their poverty'.<sup>1</sup> To make this philosophical ideal into a practical reality, they believe that rural communities are best served by maximising local, available resources, situations and skills; that all forms of useful work are equal; and that the unnatural divides of caste and communities can be overcome.

Through Shrujan, domestic embroidery is the medium used to achieve these aims. This is particularly potent when taken in the context of the Indian artistic tradition in which the artist rejects the ego of signature and instead considers that each design, each stitch, each colour is an offering to God.

**F**urthermore, it is the domestic art of women, through wall and floor paintings and auspicious wall hangings, which is used throughout India to protect the family from outside harm. This includes the damage and fear caused by financial deprivation, as well the physical hardships of drought and famine. As a domestic art used to protect the family, Shrujan embroidery can justly be seen as an extension of this. Significantly, all of these ideals are encapsulated in the belief that self-sufficiency, confidence, and dignity are the rights of women all over the world.

This initial project with Ahir women was so successful that the

Indian government approached her to work with Soof refugees who went to Kutch as a result of the 1971 Indo-Pakistan war. The Soof provided a new dimension to the Shrujan project because their embroidery is highly geometric, whereas Ahir embroidery is flowing and curvilinear with frequent use of mirrors.

Currently, Shrujan works with 16 different styles of embroidery, done by a variety of communities and tribal groups.

**I**nitially, the products and designs stayed very much within traditional parameters but slowly fashion items and new design motifs were introduced. By 1971, they were making high fashion garments such as halter neck tops and wrap around skirts. Today, inspiration may come from sources as diverse as jewellery design, wood carving, Tibetan Buddhist motifs, and the 19th century English art and crafts movement.

Village craftswomen who show a natural aptitude for design are employed by Shrujan as artists. Design is a two-way process between village artists and urban designers. In broad terms, the village artists deal with embroidery designs in their own traditional style, working with motifs, layouts and colours. This ensures that the designs retain their original flavour, but are not static. Urban designers, on the other hand, work mainly with clothes and product development, pattern cutting and internationally based colour forecasting.

The design style at Shrujan is an innovative synthesis of local embroideries and the full range of textile crafts from Kutch and throughout India. As new printing, dyeing, weaving, and tie dye techniques are developed and refined locally, they are incorporated into Shrujan's design and product range. These innovations

1. Rolland, Romain. 1960: Pp. 30-31



in design, product and process are not introduced to undermine the traditional base, nor to quickly answer a commercial imperative, but to give the craftsmen and women of the area more options when organising their own small business opportunities.

Shrujan uses only good quality fabrics and threads. This assures the consumer of a high-quality product and gives the craftswoman a sense of pride knowing that her work is worthy of the best and will not be downgraded.

Personal involvement is still very important. Chandaben Shroff now lives in Kutch where she is an active participant and friend, not just a figure-head. In addition, each craftswoman has two visits each month from Shrujan staff, who may either be from the central office or, more likely, locally from their village or one close by.

Shrujan has developed a system of delegating responsibility for production to village women called 'entrepreneurs', who have been trained in organisation and business skills. If the work load warrants it, entrepreneurs may in turn delegate to subentrepreneurs. This structure ensures management at the village level is constantly evolving rather than being left in the hands of a few without consideration for successors.

**T**he women are paid for their labour, but do not have to pay for materials. At the Shrujan central office packs of thread and cloth are made up, ready for distribution. If it is a counted thread geometric style such as Soof, Jat or Kambira, where the design cannot be drawn, the threads will be included in the proportions designated by a designer. If the style is more representational and flowing, such as Ahir, Aari or Pakko, then the packs will include cloth that has had a design already lightly stencilled on it. Nevertheless, because each piece is hand

done, the charm of individual interpretation is constant.

Completed goods are thoroughly checked to ensure that they are up to standard and every part of the design has been embroidered as required. Once back at the Shrujan central complex, the goods are washed, ironed and, if necessary, sewn and finished in the tailoring room.

**T**his level of structure and efficiency has evolved through a combination of organisational growth and individual commitment. In 1969, it was almost entirely Chandaben and Parmaben. By 1974, there was a more formal partnership of five Shroff family members, all of whom were actively involved with design and production in Kutch. Friends and business associates from outside of the family began to be involved too, so by 1982, when Shrujan formally became a non-profit making trust, there were people with diverse business and design skills available and willing to become trustees. Further assistance and in-kind support, such as marketing advice, has been provided over the years from Excel Industries, the Shroff family business.

For Chandaben, there is no conceptual division between skill, design, production and economic improvement. Consequently, it is integral to the project that the craftswomen and men of the area should have the skills to become self-sufficient business people able to develop their own market opportunities. To facilitate this, Shrujan runs training programmes both in small business management, and embroidery, at which both teachers and students are paid a stipend. Since 1969, Shrujan has provided training to over 18,000 women. In recent years, women from the traditional embroidery communities have voluntarily chosen to share their knowledge and have run

classes outside of their communities. This would have been unthinkable before their involvement with Shrujan.

**I**n 1995, Chandaben began to conceptualise a travelling resource centre and museum that would go from village to village to educate and provide professional development opportunities. This idea grew out of an increased awareness that at the end of the 20th century, the young women of Kutch were caught in a cultural predicament, often unable to leave their villages or travel far to take advantage of educational opportunities, they do not have the same link to their aesthetic history as their mothers or grandmothers.

Funded with assistance from a number of major sponsors,<sup>2</sup> The Design Centre on Wheels is an extensive and ambitious project to preserve, document and rejuvenate Kutchi embroidery. The crucial, underlying principal behind the project is that the embroidery match, and even surpass, the levels of exquisite skill practised before the more recent pressures of commercialism took over. Shrujan has deployed and trained 400 of its best craftswomen to work on this project, all of whom have benefited from the increased income that the project provides.

Although it is an ongoing project, when the first major phase is complete, there will be two collections, each consisting of traditional and contemporary designs. One collection will be for exhibition in cities around the world and the other will be maintained in Kutch for research by overseas designers and academics, and most importantly, as a mechanism

2. The many sponsors and individuals who have given generously of their time and money for this project are too numerous to mention in this limited space. However, particular acknowledgement is given to the Sir Dorabji Tata Trust and to Dr Kalpana Desai of the Prince of Wales Museum.

of professional development for the local craftswomen.

In the vast, arid, decentralised terrain of Kutch, the Design Centre on Wheels embroideries will be taken to the women in their villages. There they will be able to study the works closely to see and understand the level of skill to which they can aspire, and be exposed to a wider range of design ideas and combination of stitches. Education and information are the keys to continuing this art form as a viable means of income generation. By understanding their own rich and colourful heritage the young women of Kutch can confidently approach the future.

**O**n 26 January 2001, Kutch was hit by a massive earthquake that destroyed the main town of Bhuj and many smaller villages and towns. In spite of their headquarters being damaged beyond repair, the Shrujan campus was immediately turned into a relief centre and temporary home for many volunteers, Shrujan staff and their displaced families. At the height of the crisis, Shrujan was feeding up to 200 people per day, as well as acting as an agency for collecting and distributing relief goods.

In spite of the massive displacement of artisans, production continued wherever it could be done. The most important and immediate requirement in villages was to restore income generation. The first exhibition and sale of Shrujan goods was held in Mumbai by mid-February 2001; kits continued to be supplied to villages, and in some cases cash advances were given to artisans so that they could start the rebuilding process.

At the same time, Chandaben knew that she had to think beyond the immediate devastation and plan for medium and long term rebuilding of structures, livelihoods, morale and health. Before the earthquake, Shrujan

was experimenting with the idea of providing a common place in each village where the craftswomen could work together. From 1998 until the earthquake, Shrujan had been renting space in 12 of the villages in which they worked. In each of these, 15-20 women gathered under the guidance of an expert craftswoman. Using this system, both the women's income and the quality of work vastly improved.

Post earthquake, provision of these workstations became a high priority. Shrujan has been actively raising money to provide work stations in 40 villages. The selection of villages was based on the availability of artisans and the severity of damage to the village infrastructure. These new structures are earthquake, cyclone and fire proof. In times of disaster, they can be used as shelters for the whole community.

In 2002, plans for a new Shrujan headquarters are well under way, as are plans for a new Design Centre on Wheels Museum building. Production has returned to its full capacity, and the brave and strong people of Kutch are rebuilding their lives.

**S**ince its small beginnings in 1969, Shrujan's considerable achievements extend well beyond the training and employment of a large number of women. The organisation has helped to build houses for nomadic communities, organised cattle and health camps, and carried out relief operations during droughts, floods, a cyclone, and most recently, the earthquake.

Shrujan's work has also affected the structure of society in Kutch. Village life is deeply conservative and slow to change. Women from some communities were not allowed to leave their villages. Now, for Shrujan projects they can. Training programmes and the Design Centre on Wheels project have brought together

women from communities and castes that would never before have mixed or sat together. Now they have found that the common bonds they share are far greater than the barriers that kept them apart. But the core activity remains embroidery. Embroidery styles and quality of work have been revived. By adapting traditional craft with contemporary tastes, Shrujan has ensured that the work is easily marketable.

**P**roviding women in Kutch with a regular income has had far reaching benefits. On a material level, the women have been able to improve the lives of their families. They can invest in land, afford good health care and provide better nutrition by purchasing cows and goats, and they can do this at their own pace, from home and without leaving the village. On a personal level, economic empowerment has transformed these women into confident and competent business women. The national recognition that they now receive for their embroidery has consolidated their financial and political power and encouraged enormous respect within their communities. Even more importantly, these benefits have occurred without negative disruption to their lives within the family and the village.

Asked how being involved with Shrujan has changed her life, artist and expert craftswoman, Parmaben, who was among the first group of Ahir women, said: 'Everyone is earning and getting work, everyone comes to my house and knows me, everyone respects me in my village and outside. Earlier we were dependent upon agriculture, which was not reliable. I get wages at home in my village. I don't have to migrate.'<sup>3</sup>

3. This conversation took place and was translated for me by the (then) general manager of Shrujan, Himanshu Dugar during an interview with Parmaben, April 1996.

# Choosing a livelihood

S. OUMHYA VENKATESAN

BASED on anthropological fieldwork, this paper examines mat weaving in Pattamadai town, Tamilnadu.<sup>1</sup> Mat weaving is an important rural household activity in several parts of the state. The handlooms for mats are generally of simple construction and the raw materials are commonly available locally. Historically, therefore, handloom mat weaving has long been a low cost cottage industry and a complementary source of income for agricultural and other rural workers.

The paper focuses on livelihood choices made by members of the Labbai group, expenditures incurred by their households and the negotiated status of mat weaving. I will show that weaving is one among other livelihood choices available to the Labbai Muslim mat weavers of Pattamadai. Even though they refer to weaving as one of their traditional activities, the choice to weave today depends upon consumption patterns, household resources, personal preferences and larger market forces.

Pattamadai is located in Tirunelveli Kattabomman district, Tamilnadu state. The population is predominantly Hindu (over 55%) and Muslim (around 40%). Around 18 Hindu castes and two Tamil Muslim groups

– the Rauthers and the Labbais – are represented in the town's population.<sup>2</sup> Both Labbais and Rauthers weave mats though it is the fine mats, which the Labbai predominantly weave, that have made Pattamadai famous. The Labbais make up 5% of the town's Muslim population, approximately 650 people. Of these 50 or so weave regularly. It is difficult to fix the precise number of mat weavers as individuals take up or leave weaving at different times according to need or personal preference. Most Labbai households have a loom or the makings of a loom.

The majority of mats made in Tamilnadu have cotton warps and korai wefts. Korai belongs to the sedge family of plants, *Cyperaceae*.<sup>3</sup> Korai mats may be broadly divided into three categories. Coarse mats are rough in texture, relatively quick to weave and may be made using either a handloom or powerloom. Higher quality handloom mats are finer in texture. The highest quality have a texture akin to silk. To make such mats the korai is soaked in running water for up to a week until it begins to rot, the central pith is then scraped off and each stem split into fine strands, dried and dyed. The finer the mat desired, the longer

1. Fieldwork was carried out between 1997 and 2001. The research has been fully written up as a PhD thesis (Venkatesan 2001).

2. A discussion on the origins of the term Labbai and the historical usages of the term is beyond the scope of this paper. See Fanselow 1989, Bayly 1989, More 1997.

the korai needs to soak and the thinner the weft strands will be. The number of warp threads also increases with finer mats.

Mats having between 100 and 140 warp threads in every nine inches of their total width are only woven in Pattamadai town. They are locally known as 'super-fine mats', those with 50 warp threads in every nine inches of total mat width are termed 'fine mats'. Coarse mats cost between Rs 25 and 50. Fine mats cost between Rs 250 and 1000, the more expensive mats are richly patterned. Super-fine mats cost between Rs 800 and 3000 – the price reflecting the intricacy of design and the quality of the mat. Most fine mats take around a week to weave. It takes about four weeks to weave a super-fine mat.

**A** Pattamadai super-fine mat won a bronze medal at the Delhi Exhibition of 1903 (Watt, 1904). Following this, the mats came to be classified as suitable for gifting (see Nambiar 1964; Pate 1917; Rao 1929). In 1952 a Pattamadai mat was commissioned by a man from Madras who intended it as a coronation gift for Queen Elizabeth. This mat, publicly displayed along with other coronation gifts, came to the notice of the All-India Handicrafts Board and brought Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay to Pattamadai who encouraged the weavers to form a handicrafts cooperative society.

Today, however, private traders drawn from the Labbai group are crucial in the commissioning and marketing of mats. Two national awards for mat weaving (both in the 1990s) have continued to ensure that Pattamadai mats are regularly represented in important craft bazaars and receive media attention. In addition to governmental agencies, an NGO, the Foun-

dation for the Advancement of Craft Enterprise and Skills (FACES) works closely with the superfine mat weaving industry and has created a steady demand for these mats.

**M**arriage is a central institution, which marks a significant turning point in the lives of women in particular. After marriage, women normally move to their marital homes. The household is a chief centre for the reproduction of social norms. The group is kin and largely locality endogamous. A result of this, and of the densely housed streets, is the high level of information sharing and social contact between households.

Gender roles within the household and in the Labbai group are informed by larger structures including Islam and by attitudes pertaining to women in rural South India which lay stress on the woman's role as wife and mother. Her primary place is within the home where she engages in domestic tasks and some income generation activity.

Labbai females can be divided into three categories on the basis of their sexual and marital status. Girls who have not attained puberty are free, like their male siblings, to play in the streets and lanes around their homes. Most children are sent to school though girls are usually discontinued from school after menarche. This propels them into the next phase of their lives. Between menarche and marriage the girl stays mostly within doors learning household tasks, and helping with the cooking and cleaning. Boys in the same age group continue to attend school. Some go on to take diplomas in vocational courses or degrees, though most begin to work in their late teens.

After her marriage, some of the restrictions on the female are lifted, though her movements continue to be

monitored by her in-laws, her parents and other members of the kinship group. Over time her mobility tends to increase and women may travel singly or in groups to nearby towns on work or to visit relatives.

The transition from girl to bride is one of the most financially difficult periods for her natal household. Significant amounts of money (equalling two years or more of the natal household's income) are demanded by the parents of the groom.<sup>4</sup> In addition, gold ornaments, new clothes and gifts have to be purchased for the bride, groom and members of the groom's family.

Other expenses include the cost of a marriage feast. With the birth of the first child come more expenses. The parents of the new mother have to pay the medical costs. They also have to buy both bride and groom new clothes for the first *Id* festival after the marriage. These expenses are usually borne by the household to which the girl belongs. Other culturally defined expenditures include male circumcision and female coming of age ceremonies, births and deaths. Households also have to bear miscellaneous contingency expenses including medical and hospitalisation costs when necessary. The household's productive resources in the form of both male and female labour have to be mobilised to provide for the above as well as for daily subsistence.

**T**he Labbais of Pattamadai, both male and female, are primarily involved in the informal and unorganised sectors of the economy. Despite the high regard in which they hold governmental and other jobs in the formal sectors, they are affected by the general shortage of such jobs as well as by structural

4. There appears to be a significant increase in dowry demands over the years. An 80 old woman said that a nominal amount of Rs 1.50 was paid at her marriage 60 years ago; for her

3. See Amalraj 1990.

factors, particularly their socioeconomic status, which affect access to education and other opportunities.

**S**hort-term economic migration is an important strategy for men throughout rural towns and villages in India (Racine 1997) and the Labbais of Pattamadai are no exception. This is both because it is difficult to find jobs in Pattamadai and the possibilities of earning more are greater elsewhere. Even in households where the men can weave, they seek other sources of income, primarily from petty trade. Those men who migrate to work in the unorganised sector return to the village periodically for a few months when work is slack or to attend festivals and marriages. At such times they may take up weaving. Few Labbais do agricultural work, hardly any own agricultural land.

Men also migrate abroad for a few years and repatriate money. The most lucrative work is available in Middle Eastern countries. Such trips are only possible through specialist agents based in Chennai or Mumbai. The agent charges a commission for organising tickets, a job and necessary permits. While the returns are high, the initial capital outlay is a significant cost.

Certain occupations are considered 'traditional'. These include mat weaving, trading and acting as ritual specialists. The ritual tasks include leading congregations in prayer, performing marriages, effecting reconciliations between estranged marital partners, and exorcism. As members of the group are also called upon to officiate at funerary rites, however,

grand-daughter's wedding in 1998, the dowry demanded was Rs 50,000. Another woman in her late forties said that the dowry for her marriage 21 years ago was Rs 150 while for her daughter's marriage in 1998, it was Rs 30,000. Even with the fall in the real value of the rupee, this represents a significant increase.

ritual specialisation contributes to the low status of Labbais among other Tamil Muslim groups. Additionally, payment for services in mosques and at household ceremonies and life-cycle events was irregular and sporadic, placing them within the poorest section of Muslim society (Fanselow 1989).

Ritual specialisation has, however, opened up new avenues. Some men make short trips to neighbouring nations outside the subcontinent where they act as ritual specialists in the homes of wealthy immigrant Tamil Muslims. They may also lead mosque congregations. From what I could gather, cash donations for these activities are generous. The cost of each trip is large but the returns can be high.

**H**ouseholds borrow money on interest from the rural non-formal credit sector to raise the capital outlay required for overseas migrations. Loans are rarely available from the formal sectors of the economy. Even money repatriated from abroad may not be enough to pay for marriage or other large expenses and equally not all men can get or want jobs abroad. In common with other parts of the country, chit fund schemes (Rotating Savings and Credit Associations or ROSCAs) are an important way of raising money.<sup>5</sup>

A group of people, usually from the same caste or sub-group, join together and agree to contribute a fixed monthly sum (chit) for a predetermined number of months. The group is coordinated by one member who extracts a commission from each contribution. Each month the contributors bid to be allowed to take that month's total contributions (less the commis-

5. For anthropological studies of ROSCAs, see the edited volume by Ardener 1996 (1995).

sion). The highest bidder obtains the lump sum and their bid is distributed equally amongst the other contributors. Each contributor can only get the lump sum once.

The obvious problem with joining a chit scheme is that contributors get less money than they have put into the common pool. The commitment to paying a chit every month for a number of months is also difficult for a group whose lives are characterised by a lack of financial safety nets or economic security. People often borrow money to keep up with chit contributions. However, chit schemes allow a person with no other sources of liquidity to access large sums of money at short notice. This is what makes them so important and individuals often participate in several chit schemes simultaneously.

Household income generation activities and money repatriated by men working outside Pattamadai bring in regular sums of money for subsistence needs and help pay chit contributions. In most households, women and unmarried teenage daughters participate in productive activities in the domestic setting. Beedi rolling and mat weaving, the two main household activities, provide regular income as the worker is paid piece rates and usually, barring illnesses or marriages or festivals in the home, works everyday. Large sums of money for special consumption needs are accessed through male migration and ROSCAs described above.

**M**at weaving can be seen as an embodied resource – a bodily technique, the knowledge of which stays with the person for life and can be activated in times of need. Thus men may weave in-between migratory trips or when business is slack and women who have stopped weaving may resume when there is a need.

Even non-weaving households whose members do not express any intention of taking up weaving in the foreseeable future, are loath to sell loom components, many of which are difficult to replace. This underscores the importance of weaving as an important resource for the Labbais of Pattamadai.

**W**eavers have complex feelings about their work. Most weave what may be termed standardised mats—the patterns woven on the mat and the order in which they are woven are rarely varied. Some, however, occasionally weave special mats with innovative designs and colours. These special mats, though often submitted to awards competitions, are rarely woven just to increase earnings or receive external recognition. They form the subject of extensive and often highly technical discussion among weavers. They are an expression of creativity and individuality. At the same time, mat weaving is seen as difficult work especially where people perceive they have few alternative options. Narratives about weaving incorporate both these viewpoints though the idea of weaving as drudgery predominates everyday discussions about work.

Many males *want* to work outside Pattamadai. The weaver cannot be mobile. The very nature of his occupation requires his physical presence at the loom, which is firmly fixed in space. Men who become migrant workers, on the other hand, sample new experiences, difficult though their lives as migrants may be. Their narratives both reveal distaste for certain aspects of migration and pleasure in others. Women have fewer options due to restrictions on their working outside the home. Men work primarily in super-fine mat weaving, while women can be found throughout the weaving industry.

The choice of household based occupation — beedi rolling or mat weaving — is usually left to the woman, though especially in the case of unmarried girls, it is dependent on the availability of equipment and someone (usually the mother or a close relative) who can teach the requisite work. Income generation skills are seen as an insurance against hardship in the future and girls are taught more than one such skill. 'A female child must know some handwork (*kaithozhil*). Boys can manage somehow or the other'.<sup>6</sup>

Teaching within the home is informal. Youngsters learn by watching and occasionally receive direct instruction. Like mat weaving, beedi rolling too is an embodied resource albeit one which has the added advantage of requiring little specialised equipment. As long as one knows how to roll beedies and beedi companies in the area put out work, it is possible to earn some money. Beedi rolling has the added advantage of being a more mobile task than mat weaving and girls who leave Pattamadai after marriage often continue working for beedi companies.<sup>7</sup>

**I**n this section, I examine the interplay of the above strategies and issues through the detailed discussion of one household over a period of four years (1997-2001).<sup>8</sup>

Bibi is a super-fine mat weaver. In 1997 her income from mat weav-

ing amounted to around Rs 1000 a month. Bibi's husband, Bhai, can weave but usually works outside Pattamadai. In 1997 he, along with his son and one of his sons-in-law, started a small shop in a South Indian town. The business failed and the group dispersed. Bhai returned to Pattamadai and his son and son-in-law moved to a North Indian city. The low-paid jobs they managed to find barely sufficed to meet their subsistence needs.

**T**he failure of the business imposed severe financial strain on the household. This was exacerbated by the fact that Bhai's sister wanted her daughter, who was betrothed to Bhai's son, to be married soon. This was particularly important since the son had moved to the city where Bhai's sister lived with her husband and daughters. After the marriage he could move into their house. In keeping with custom however, his marriage could not take place until all his sisters were married. A marriage was therefore arranged for Bibi and Bhai's second daughter in 1998.

The household was unprepared for the cost of the daughter's marriage. Following the failure of the shop, there was little extra money. They had to pledge half their house as collateral to borrow Rs 50,000 from a broker at 3% interest per month. They also joined two chit funds. Shortly after her marriage, Bibi's daughter became pregnant. This imposed more debt as it is customary for her parents to bear all the costs of their daughters' first pregnancy.

Bibi stepped up her production of mats. This exacerbated an eye condition but she felt she had little choice. Bhai went abroad several times for a few months each. He had to borrow money on interest to pay for tickets and other expenses. Even though he returned with significant sums, the

6. 'Penn pillaiakku kai thozhil theriyannum, aann pillaiinga yeppadiyavadhu pozhai-chuppanga.' Maideen Bivi, Pattamadai, 2000.

7. Tirunelveli is among the most important centres in India for home-based beedi rolling and many beedi companies operate in the area including in Pattamadai (Gopal 1999). It is not only Labbai women who roll beedis; throughout the town women can be seen sitting in their houses or at doorsteps hard at work.

8. The names and specific identifying features of the household have been altered to protect people's identities.

nature of the trips was such that he could send no money to his household while away. This made things difficult in the short term.

During the six month period between mid-June 1999 and end January 2000, Bibi earned an average monthly income from mat weaving of around Rs 2500. However, the household's monthly chit fund contribution subsumed a large proportion of her earnings, as did the need to raise money for tickets abroad for Bhai. The household also looked to the formal sectors of the economy for money. In 1999-2000, loans of Rs 10000 each were available to members of specially formed 'self-help groups' of female mat weavers. Bibi joined one such group. The loan was utilised in debt servicing.

**T**he Labbais of Pattamadai live and work within a framework of relationships based on endogamy, group affiliation, occupation and religion. These frames define the larger identity of the group in relation to other groups, and are the basis on which important decisions at the household level, pertaining to members and their lives, are made. Constraints on the group include structural poverty and the lack of any financial security. High expectations of social consumption mean that the line between relative financial comfort and indebtedness is very thin. In order to cope with this, individuals and households adopt several strategies. These include tapping into available sources of credit, economic migration, participation in household industry including mat weaving and petty trade.

Bibi's case shows that the income from mat weaving can be regular and not insubstantial. However, marriage and childbirth expenses impose a heavy burden on households. While mat weaving is a means

of livelihood and self-expression, by its very nature, it can only bring in a certain amount of money. It takes at least a week to weave a fine mat and up to a month to weave a super-fine mat. Even though market demand for mats is high, household earnings from weaving are constrained by the availability of money for raw materials, the number of looms and the amount of space and the number of people able and willing to weave. The expectations regarding social consumption, especially mean that mat weaving can only be one livelihood choice among others, albeit a special choice, for the majority of the Labbai group in Pattamadai.

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# In the eye of the artisan

JUDY FRATER

MONGHIBEN Rabari is attending an exhibition and sale in Mumbai. Her traditional embroidery has taken her from Vandh, her village of mud huts and camels on the seacoast of Kutch, to India's most cosmopolitan urban metropolis. She is thrilled by the glittering bustle, and by the customers' enthusiastic response. She deals directly with them, as a professional artisan. And not only do the customers buy; one woman is so impressed that she wants to learn how to embroider. She engages Monghi as a teacher during the afternoon lulls at the exhibition.

We have succeeded in the transition from tradition to profession. Crafts have become viable, both economically and culturally. Women are earning fair wages for their art, and also respect. I ask Monghi how she likes being a teacher.

'Sometimes it seems like all we *do* is embroidery!' she exclaims in exasperation.

Three decades ago, would Monghi's mother Lachhuben have harboured the same ambivalence?

Lachhuben learned embroidery in Viyar village when she was 15 or 16. By the early 1970s many Kachhi Rabaris of western Kutch had already stopped migrating more than a day's distance. Lachhuben stayed in the village, but did not go to school. Instead, she and her friends would sit together and stitch as if in a class, intent on learning the elements that comprise the unique Rabari style. Their mothers taught them to set mirrors, then to make the characteristic tight square chain stitch. Stitches had to be even, straight, and as fine as the girls could execute. Traditional motifs consisting of geometric borders laid out in specific patterns, and bold portrayals of parrots, trees and abstract figures, each named for an aspect familiar to Rabari life, had to be learned. The characteristic colour patterning: outlining with saffron alternating with



white, filling with a succession of bright accent colours, was also internalized. When the basic stitches were mastered, the girls learned the repertoire of accent stitches that decorate traditional Rabari work. The combination of stitch, colour, pattern and motif defined Rabari style.

Lachhuben became known as a very accomplished artisan, though she worked in the same conventional way as her peers. Being an artisan was part of being Rabari. Individuality, expressed in subtle variations of skill, and specific choices from among the accepted repertoire of motifs, was recognized as we recognize handwriting. Innovation was limited. Styles changed slowly over generations.

**A**ll Rabari girls were expected to embroider *kanchali*/backless blouses, *paheranul*/wrapped skirts, a *ghagharol* stitched skirt, and *ludi*/woollen veil as dowry pieces to be brought out at the time of marriage. Other embroideries required of the bride, including a set of household decorations, purses and bags, were brought out on the Holi after the birth of the first son. The glittering pieces that a girl embroidered for her dowry were considered wealth, a contribution to the marriage exchange. Furthermore, embroidery was often a basis for judging a girl's capability. Lachhuben and her peers worked as artists, without thought of time, concentrating on making the most beautiful contributions they could, knowing that their work would be appreciated by community members who shared their aesthetics and values. Not only would Rabaris not think of dowry pieces and personal adornment in terms of commercial value; they feared showing them lest outsiders would try to purchase them.

Asked what problems she faced in doing traditional work, Lachhuben responds with an exclamation echoed

by the women sitting with her on her mud porch. Physical troubles! Rabaris assume a pose with knees up while embroidering to support the cloth at a comfortable distance. Sitting cramped for hours makes the legs stiff and even affects the digestive system.

**I**n the last two decades many changes have impacted traditional embroideries and women embroiderers of Kutch. Periodic droughts and spiralling inflation forced rural communities to seek supplements to the meager earnings of pastoralist, agriculturist and professional male artisan incomes. As contact with market economies increased, economics leveraged culture. Rural women began to seek work for wages. Simultaneously, embroidered embellishment came into fashion in India and abroad, and has since enjoyed a remarkably long popularity.

Commercialization of an art that was meant for the home held mutual appeal. Artisans could earn without disturbing the social order. At first, women worked in the unorganized sector. They did embroidery for shopkeepers or local middlemen. In rare instances, women also went out, picking up enough work for a group of women. They worked on 'labour' embroidery, whatever was given to them, regardless of material and style. But neither artisans nor customer were satisfied. Pay was extremely low, even when more was promised. When artisans did their best work, the client criticized them; it wasn't the style expected. Deceit and disappointment abounded.

Those communities who were less culturally restricted explored their options. They found more lucrative seasonal work as agricultural labourers, in government drought relief projects, or even in construction. Women who were not allowed outside the village had little choice but to

earn by embroidering at substandard rates.

Over time, new opportunities in embroidering for wages came. Rates improved, but even when women are allowed to set their own wages, they rarely earn as much as they could by other means of manual labour, because the accepted perceived value for handwork is still low. Relativity to possibility has most probably kept the wage for handwork down. Women of many communities still have few options to earn and will thus work for whatever is offered. Asked if she could earn as much embroidering as doing drought relief work, Monghi calculated and replied, 'if we get up early and don't wash our hair that day.' Even when rates are similar, women may prefer manual labour. Embroidery is tedious, as Lachhuben pointed out, and physically demanding.

**W**here women have chosen to embroider for a living, they make a clear bifurcation between commercial and traditional handwork. The two are different entities, and do not directly overlap. Rules and standards for each are distinct. Yet, working with the market does affect how a woman feels about herself as an artisan and as a member of her society.

The first and perhaps biggest impact of commercial work is the separation of design, or art, and craft, or labour. Artisans are asked to make what someone else tells them to make, rather than work from their own sense of aesthetics. When presented with a set of four alien coloured threads, Rabari women balked. 'If we use these, it won't be Rabari,' they said. In traditional work, there is no distinct separation of colour, stitch, pattern and motif; these work together in units. Design intervention separates these elements and juxtaposes them in new ways.

The result often disempowers artisans because it is done without explanation or means of access. After several months of working for wages, one senior artisan attended the sorting of products. Observing, she became increasingly agitated. When her own piece went into the reject pile, she visibly resigned, exclaiming, 'then just tell me what to do; I don't know what you want.' In another instance, a group of women who do cross stitch embroidery and had been working commercially for some time refused to take on new work without a pattern printed on the cloth. They had given up their confidence in their traditional art, which of course is worked out by counting. When design is reserved for a professional designer and craft is relegated to the artisan, the artisan is reduced to a labourer. In effect, she is correct in her assessment that there is no difference between construction work and commercial embroidery.

**W**hile in the embroidery workplace, a woman's sense of herself as an artisan may have diminished, her sense of worth as a member of her society has strengthened. Professional embroiderers have become acutely conscious of labour, time and the connection between them. In the workplace, they have learned to value time over aesthetic and have, consciously or not, learned to analyze their own work in order to maximize their efforts. When an embroiderer increases the distance between stitches by a hairsbreadth, or eliminates one of ten mirrors, she is intelligently extending her capacity to earn. Earning from embroidery began as part time, often sporadic supplementary income for the family. But as families realized that they could depend on this income, they began to regard earnings and earners with more respect. Small adjustments in domestic patterns ena-

bled women to devote more time to embroidering for cash.

**I**n producer groups in which embroiderers are given the opportunity for input, mutual responsibility and a sense of professionalism has grown. In Kala Raksha, we have observed instances in which work is given priority over social obligations. Lachhuben and Rajabhai postpone their daughter's wedding because the date suggested conflicts with the annual exhibition in Delhi. Even after her wedding date is fixed, Kamlaben defers work on her dowry because she wants to win the annual prize for top earner. Miraben's husband cooks the noon meal so that she can work as production assistant – and after work they send out for *bhajiya* because neither one feels like cooking and they can afford it. In the context of conservative societies characterized by strict adherence to prescribed behaviour, customs and roles, these are small but revolutionary changes.

Awareness of their capacity to earn gives women the sense of options. But the ensuing social change is not necessarily good for society or individual. On Environment Day a group of embroiderers offered to pay someone else to do their civic duty of cleaning the common ground, because they could afford to. Finally, professionalism can bring to bear the ills of the urban world. The same Miraben silently endured a painful illness for a week because she dared not shirk scheduled duties in the workshop to go to the doctor.

Over time, some women have determined that the reliable income and comforts of working at home compensate for relatively low wages, and greater changes have quietly taken place. Nomadic Rabari women no longer have to migrate. 'Because we can rely on earning through our

embroidery,' they say, 'we no longer have to toughen our hands and blacken our skin in the harsh desert sun.' Jat women, chronically in debt, can now think of facing the bank and one day paying off their loans.

**T**he massive earthquake that devastated Kutch in January 2001 precipitated unimagined changes in the economics of handwork. Nascent social changes accelerated exponentially. In Kala Raksha, we initiated a programme of distributing rehabilitation funds in the form of matching grants against wages. The incentive of earning double, meant to encourage women to participate in their own rehabilitation, in addition unequivocally illustrated the importance of good wages in productivity. Women worked more. Their production capacity doubled! They also worked better. No longer feeling they needed to increase the distance between stitches by a hairsbreadth, or eliminate one of ten mirrors, they produced embroidery of excellent quality. The small domestic adjustments went public. Family members gladly helped with cooking, cleaning and child care to enable women to maximize their embroidering time, now doubly valued.

Women used their matching grants to improve their families' nutrition, repair homes, plant fields, seek timely medical attention, implement time saving and income generating activities, and pay off loans. Clearly, women know what to do with their income. The fact that they do not usually spend on better food or invest does not mean that they do not know how to use money, but simply that they do not have enough to use. Earning more enabled women to dare to reach for what they want.

The earthquake provided these women with the opportunity to expe-

rience their ability to significantly improve their standard of living. Time will tell if they value these changes enough to continue the trend even when wages are no longer double.

As the women of Kala Raksha began to value their work more seriously, embroiderers all over Kutch realized that they too had to. Sadly, the enormous need for reconstruction in post-earthquake Kutch and the astounding outpouring of funding for that purpose, were coupled with greed. Instead of offering day labour jobs to local villagers who critically needed the income, construction coordinators brought in cheap *adivasi* labour. Suddenly, unskilled earning options for both men and women of Kutch closed. Artisans know it is likely that this new low-rung labour force will resettle in Kutch and take up the agriculture, drought relief and construction jobs of which they and their husbands once availed.

**W**hatever means of earning they have pursued, women now have limited time for traditional embroidery. Yet, the cultural demand for embroidery is intact, and in some communities even increasing. Coping successfully with the contemporary commercial world does not preclude maintaining a tradition. Women now have to balance multiple demands on limited time, and time is suddenly a critical issue.

Communities are dealing with this issue in creative ways. But in nearly all cases, the sacrifice is the timeless sense of art. In traditional work, created with an artisan's best skill to satisfy her own sensibility, time can never be a factor. Artisans themselves cannot afford the luxury of sentimentality. Ever practical, they predict that only if a girl's father is well off can she afford to do her own embroidery. In their assessment,

otherwise, there is little hope of saving traditional work. Ultimately, the need to earn will ruin and end traditional embroidery.

The emergence of the concept of time has brought a consciousness of labour to the home as well as the workplace. Embroidery is art, and it is also labour. These aspects, once integrated like the elements of colour, stitch, pattern and motif, are today delineated. Now, the focus is on the labour aspect of embroidery. In their traditional work, women look for ways to minimize effort. Among some communities such as Sodha Rajputs, Maru Meghvals and Garasia Jats, certain objects traditionally embroidered have been made obsolete, and a woman's personal efforts on cultural pieces are concentrated on a few essential masterpieces.

Among Rabaris, whose traditions are still vital, the embellished items brought in a dowry are increasing. Two subgroups of Kutch have responded in different ways. Kachhi Rabaris have combined time saving machine embroidery and ready-made elements such as rick-rack with hand work in their traditional style. The elders of the Dhebaria Rabaris banned the use of handwork completely in 1995, and women substituted ribbons and trims appliquéd elaborately to emulate their rich handwork traditions.<sup>1</sup> Subsequently, other communities found this an excellent idea, and the use of ribbons and trims to substitute or supplement handwork has become fashion throughout embroidering communities of Kutch.

**F**ashion, like time and labour, has emerged as a concept in rural Kutch. Communities have always adhered to share styles of embellishment and dress. And these traditions have

1. For more information see Frater, 1999 and Frater, forthcoming.

always evolved in response to social and cultural impacts. But fashions change rapidly. This is an essential difference between fashion and tradition.

The minimization of labour in traditional art has allowed entry of new elements and enabled more rapid execution. Changes can take place more quickly, and they do. In rural fashion, as with tradition, styles continue to be shared by an entire community. It is the elements considered acceptable, the rate at which acceptability changes, and the concomitant constant requiring of cash expenditure that are contemporary.

**C**ontact with the market did not directly bring fashion to rural Kutch. Rural fashion does not draw on commercial work. The only instance I have observed is Maru Meghvals using muted 'English' colours as occasional novelty. Nor have the habits of commercial craftsmanship crept in. Women welcome time saving devices, but not compromises in craftsmanship. Within the community, fine skill and sensibility are still a matter of personal worth.

What contact with the market did was to bring women in touch with a vast array of new materials, colours and patterns. As a result, artisans have become receptive to changes in style. In their own world, however, they choose new elements according to their own, still vital sense of aesthetics.

The other major impact of the market on traditional art is, once again, increased earning. Money has enabled women to participate in fashion. Money buys time saving elements. It is a fair exchange, especially with the increased valuation of time.

Among elders, fashion is seen as a breaking down of tradition. The elements of traditional style that were thought to define it are being replaced.

No longer need a young Rabari woman wear wool or even black. No longer need her embroidery be done by hand – no even be embroidered at all!

In a classic generation gap, young women see tradition opening up. Fashion is the new tradition, and they can consciously shape it. Among the Kachhi Rabaris, for example, it is the young engaged and newly married women themselves who have increased the dowry requirements in an artful one-up-manship. When a bride arrives at her in-laws', contemporaries ask aloud how many *kanchali*/blouses she has brought? The new bride makes a point to wear a new *kanchali* each day and everyone inspects and reports on it with excruciating detail. Bonding with peers is essential; thus fashion becomes critical.

**W**hy is Monghi, now immersed in preparing her dowry embroideries, ambivalent about embroidery? For young artisans of Kutch today embroidery has multiple dimensions. It is a means of earning a livelihood, increasingly important for the family, and it is an increasing social obligation. Perhaps Monghi is right: embroidery is all she does.

Lachhuben regards her daughter working with intense concentration on her dowry. Monghi no longer likes the elaborate patches she did for her *ludi*/veil. They are no longer in fashion; she has a new idea. Now she needs to do a cupboard curtain, too, because some other girls have added that to their dowry. 'Sometimes I wish our elders would ban our embroidery, too,' Lachhuben confides, 'then we would be released of this obligation.'

But embroidery is still an important means of expressing creativity. Perhaps herein lies the source of ambivalence. Monghi loves the designing aspect of the new traditional

work. By focusing on the labour aspect of embroidery, and eliminating some of the tedium of handwork, women in all communities have shifted the focus of creativity. Different skills have become important in new fashion traditions: choosing from the array of available materials, conceptualizing patterns and, in many cases, sewing (in addition to embroidering). The new styles, in fact, allow women to focus on design rather than execution.

With this, the sense of the individual has emerged. In the slow evolution of traditions, individuals were rarely credited with innovations. Nor did they wish to be. In traditional societies conformity is critical. Subtle changes in motifs or patterns were welcomed, but initiation was underplayed, and the designs were quickly dispersed among the group. Now, women take credit for their contributions. They will quickly point out, 'I came up with that pattern!' Others will say, that is 'Daya's design.'

Monghi has a sudden inspiration: she will embroider a whole border for her *ludi*/veil, rather than the two patches in the corners that have been current fashion. She chooses a bold diagonal pattern, and adds holography sequins instead of mirrors, to lighten the weight and dazzle the eye. As a flourish in a raga, her idea elicits a spontaneous 'wah!' among her peers. Everyone is impressed, and Monghi has the great satisfaction that she has started a fashion trend. It will be beautiful, and it will be attributed to her. The two borders take time, but the ratio of time to result is culturally cost effective.

**E**mbroidery in rural Kutch is in transition. It plays two roles, that of income generation and that of expressing culture. From Monghi's point of view, professional embroidery is be-

coming viable both economically and culturally. Women have more status in their societies because they are earning. But they also have more responsibility and much less time. The wages for commercial work are less than desirable; the work is not creative. In fact, women are investing in commercial work the labour that they are eschewing in their own embroidery. Monghi knows there are other options. Awareness of options is one of the goals of empowering women through income generation. Dissatisfaction and struggling are a part of understanding choice.

**T**he very pressure of balancing two types of embroidery has actually forced artisans to take creative leaps in their own work, to find ways to minimize tedium and focus on the art of craft. In a sense, the elder artisans' prediction that the need to earn will end traditional embroidery is true; tradition as they know it is radically changing. How it changes is in the young artisans' hands. Less bound by narrow concepts of tradition, more focused on design and innovation, embroidery for expression of culture has the potential to become more than ever an art form, and a source of confidence and satisfaction. The artisans alone can decide. Only when women create out of choice can it remain art.

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# A route to self-reliance

Interview with Ashoke Chatterjee by Carolyn Jongeward

Ashoke Chatterjee was executive director of National Institute of Design (NID) from 1975-85, Senior Faculty Advisor for Design Management and Communication from 1985 to 1995, and Distinguished Fellow at NID from 1995 until retirement in 2001. He has served for many years as honorary president of the Crafts Council of India and continues to work as a consultant in India and internationally, especially on projects concerned with water management and environmental issues. After more than ten years as international advisor, in 2000 Ashoke Chatterjee joined the board of directors of Aid to Artisans, a US based non-profit organization that offers practical assistance to artisans worldwide.

NID in Ahmedabad is internationally recognized as one of the foremost institutions in the field of design education, research and training. In 1975, NID was invited to be involved with the Rural University, a new concept in education and rural development initiated by Professor Ravi Matthai, first director of the Indian Institute of Management (IIM), Ahmedabad. Ashoke Chatterjee became part of the Rural University team that worked with people of the Jawaja block, which included about 200 villages with a population of approximately 80,000 people in a drought prone district of Rajasthan.

The Jawaja project was an educational experiment-in-action based on the idea that development activities must be a vehicle for learning. Although the

Indian government designated Jawaja as a region of high poverty and no resources, some people were knowledgeable of spinning and weaving and there were a few looms. Weaving and leatherwork became the basis for economic development activities, and through the participation of its designers, NID tested the relevancy of bringing design education into this rural context.

This interview, recorded in October 1997 at NID, focuses on the story of Jawaja. Any changes or developments that subsequently occurred, particularly at Jawaja, have not been included in this account.

**CJ:** *Looking back over the many years of your involvement in craft development, what stands out as a significant experience?*

**AC:** The most seminal experience has been Jawaja. At the time NID was debating the relevance of design and looking at crafts in terms of the challenges of development: the transitions taking place, the potential and complexity of this sector. Craft is not a homogeneous area. It is about hand skills but it is full of diversity and contradictions. Jawaja, however, was quite removed from all the discussions about tradition, culture and preservation of all that. Jawaja was a life and death situation.

As a country we have inadequately addressed the issues of craft. We try to intervene in different parts but we have not looked at craft in an integrated, holistic way. The Jawaja project was one experiment which integrated many aspects of craft: heritage, culture, social structure, design vocabulary and NID's design inheritance. But it was not a craft project; it was deve-

\*The author acknowledges the financial assistance of the Government of India through the India Studies Programme of the Shastri Indo-Canadian Institute. The interview was conducted on 20 October 1997; this revised text, August 2002.

lopment defined as self-reliance for those who have been the most dependent in our society. Ravi Matthai explained self-reliance thus: Can people do something for themselves tomorrow that others are doing for them today and they should be released of that dependence? Ultimately, Jawaja taught us that the whole is about people and you have to attend to people first and last or else nothing you do will be sustained.

Although not the intention, we took the craft route and consequently were able to demonstrate what an enormous force the crafts can be in this country. Craft is the strength inherent in our people. They know what they do with their hands and there needs to be a market for what they make. The move towards self-reliance forced us to tap the considerable design energies of the community. We went to Jawaja being told that there were no resources, but instead found people with an extremely good understanding of design and an ability to innovate their own designs. We decided to create craft products that the local power structure, the moneylenders, knew nothing about. It was not an option to make traditional products to sell in markets controlled by the power structure. This route had to be bypassed. To exercise this option they could not make colourful juttis and footwear that were in the control of the people they were trying to escape from; they began to serve a market that the power structure had no control over. Now they have become a part of the power structure. And the women's groups are doing embroidery applied to the leather and making richly embroidered diary covers.

While there has been tremendous interaction between designers and craftspeople at Jawaja, the designers worked within certain constraints. The designs had to be what the weavers could understand, respond to, modify and develop. If the weavers were just sent a design, they would be in no position to take ownership and we were keen that they have design ownership. We also encouraged them to interact with buyers. So there was considerable discussion of what the people of Jawaja felt would be suitable. For example, craftspeople knew they had to modify their designs in response to a particular market, the dyes and weaves they knew best, the available raw materials, and cost implications. Design diversification happened within this constraint because the idea was to make the design process understandable and manageable by the craftspeople.

In terms of designs that have emerged, it is not easy to say which designs are theirs and which are ours

and which come from buyers. Some critics of the Jawaja project believed we were not tapping the traditional strength and products of Rajasthani craftsmen. Early on, critics said the designs were Scandinavian because one of the original designers was from Finland and they assumed she was intervening and imposing. But the floor coverings emerging from Jawaja, with strong earth colours and simple geometrical designs, came from the craftspeople whose environment inspired them. They produced a simple design which they could do in various colour-ways in response to a market.

**CJ:** *How did people at IIM and NID conceptualize the Jawaja project?*

**AC:** It started over 20 years ago with a desire to see whether there was anything that institutions like IIM and NID knew that could be relevant to this country at the very gut level of problem solving, the level of hunger, poverty and deprivation. Most of our institutions skirt this issue because we tend to gravitate towards the more organized Indians who respond to us quickly. At the outset, Ravi Matthai said to us at NID, if you are worried about the relevance of design in India, come along. We don't know what will happen here. Join the team. The intention was to look at how to make education relevant. How do we test management skills in this area? How do we transfer skills in management to a rural community in order for them to manage their affairs?

When Professor Matthai looked for a space for an educational experiment he found hostility in every village towards schools. Schools were seen as totally irrelevant and a factor for alienation because they had nothing to do with gut issues that these communities were dealing with. Much of the dialogue at Jawaja began with schoolteachers: What do you think this place has? What are the needs? So teachers became the first resource persons. And two schoolteachers became very important because they provided the vision and insight and the bridge to the community. They were trusted. They began to articulate what they thought this community was capable of. They also began to understand what the external institutions had to offer and they were important in making the link. They became local leaders.

The first reaction of NID students and teachers who went to Jawaja was a sense of guilt and a response of charity. They said the issue was not about design but about sending people food, clothing, doctors and medicine. We had to deal with that. It is a difficult place to

work emotionally and one does get very emotionally involved with this community.

**CJ:** *How do you compare Jawaja now to what was happening 15 to 20 years ago?*

**AC:** 15 to 20 years ago craftspeople of Jawaja had no ability to deal with the external market. There was no capacity to understand the needs of buyers far removed from them physically, socially, emotionally and psychologically. That gap was huge. They felt inadequate and that they needed to wait until someone told them what to do. In those days they couldn't enter the Taj Hotel in Bombay to have direct contact with a buyer. Now they are no longer thrown out of the Taj Hotel. They are travelled widely and have developed street smarts to cope.

Now their products have gained an international reputation, not just occasional local exposure. OXFAM, just one of their international buyers, has sold their crafts for almost 15 years. This is a huge accomplishment for this community. They have learned through all the ups and downs to satisfy a buyer far away, and to understand what this means in terms of their own vision. Many of these people had never been to Jaipur. Some had not even been to Ajmer only 40 minutes away. And now because London is a place they deal with they can say, we don't think it is fair that the buyer in London has rejected this product.

Earlier in the project we imposed on the craftspeople an obligation to train others. Since a principle of the Jawaja project was that nothing would be free, they were required to teach another village what they had been taught. This was not easy. They crossed caste barriers and encountered social problems. One man said he couldn't undertake training in certain villages where he was not on speaking terms with some people. NID said, find a way of training without speaking. After teaching without speaking and realizing the absurdity of the situation, he re-established a cordial relationship. Now the craftspeople have become part of a training programme for income generation capacity building at the rural level in the state of Rajasthan. Many of the weavers and leather workers are recognized trainers who go to various parts of Rajasthan and provide training to other groups. NID has also recommended that the Jawaja community be part of the Institute of Crafts being set up in Jaipur. They could become trainers and this would also give them status and recognition.

A major challenge today is their own internal capacity for working together and decision making in

difficult situations, such as quality control. They don't have a mutually accepted standard of quality for people to measure up to and sometimes they put sub-quality materials with good quality materials in a shipment. Or there are pressures to accept quality that is not top class. In addition, they need to take on the discipline of bank loans and repayment of bank loans. They would rather have an external agency do the difficult work of dealing with people who default on bank loans.

It is difficult to summarize where they are now. The people of Jawaja are now self-reliant over many things for which they were totally dependent in the past. But what right did we have to expect this community to be totally self-reliant? They still don't have adequate drinking water, adequate sewage sanitation, or education. The health facilities are terrible.

At NID we realize that after 20 years we are also not self-reliant. We are battling with a government that is now reducing their grants to us. Constantly, in development projects, we expect things to happen at the village and grassroots level that we never expect at our own level. We take our own dependency as part of a normal social and political structure. Today the Jawaja craftspeople are very dependent on outside support for marketing. And the major cause for their dependence is that marketing for the entire craft sector in India has been tragically neglected. Marketing in India is a complicated scene for Proctor & Gamble and McDonalds, let alone for a group of artisans. And those companies have advertising agencies, banks and consultants. Artisans as a group have none of that infrastructure and we expect them to be self-reliant, when nobody else is!

No one from IIM is involved today. After Ravi Matthai died suddenly in England, Rajiv Gupta, a colleague at IIM took over the Jawaja Project until his retirement. But this project continues to require emotional and physical stamina. You cannot cut yourself off like you can from other clients. There is never a point where everything is done for them. It is always an ever-widening circle of problems. They keep saying, tell us what we should do. And we say, no, tell us what you think you want to do. And they get impatient with us. Basically the whole issue is how can we help them develop their own problem solving skills. And there are many things that this project did not address: the problems of women, problems of health, and the scarcity of drinking water. There is a whole range of issues that need attention, which our project has not been able to attend.



**CJ:** *How has the Jawaja project changed your view of what is possible in regard to the continuity of crafts?*

**AC:** In my own work with the Crafts Council and other groups I say, respect the aspects of culture and traditions that we have long associated with crafts, but also ensure that the social-economic situation of the people is put at the top of the agenda. Jawaja provided a benchmark in crafts: first focus on and understand the community before we intervene in crafts. Who are the people? What are their earnings? What are their aspirations? What is in it for them? Before we start giving people lectures about their ancient traditions, ask what's in it for them to stay in the tradition? In the case of Jawaja, many of the heritage problems for leather workers were things they wanted to run away from. Their caste elders told them they must not be identified as leather workers; they must have some other identity. When they stopped flaying animals they were left stranded without an identity. We often look at tradition and heredity as some exquisite artefact, but for them it was centuries-old discrimination.

These things are not easy to look at. In the Crafts Council we have tried to ask what can we do to encourage someone who wants to stay within the tradition? Not force them into it, not make it a kind of a burden. But consider what can be done to encourage any young people who want to remain in the tradition and ensure that their staying in this craft is not at the cost of their own progress as human beings, but rather supplements their progress as human beings. We have also tried in a modest way to help them with facilities for diversifying and opportunities for income generation. Why should people do crafts full time if they don't want to? Some craftspeople have also become accountants and computer operators. We say, that's fine. Let your child have that option. But don't let them look at the craft tradition and say they have to discard it because it is holding them back; it is a chain. And interventions should not make them think there is something wrong with wanting to shift out of craft. We don't want these communities or individuals to feel like they are museum pieces. They should feel they have an option.

Now we are stuck with this great controversy on child labour. We are struggling with how to cope with this issue, because the whole thing of father to son and mother to daughter is part of this honoured and treasured tradition. But we know that we must not close our eyes to exploitation. Exploitation in certain crafts like brassware, glass, the carpet industry is incredibly severe. How does one balance this? How does one create an intelligent understanding among buyers in

India and overseas that the issue is that these children must be in school? People need to realize that learning a craft within the family home need not be considered exploitation. It can be a very rich experience. Easy generalizations should be avoided and yet there is no question that exploitation exists.

Even in Jawaja the women do half the work involved in craft processes. But do the craftsmen account for that in their costing and pricing? Do they transfer funds to them? How many women members are in the association? None of that is considered. There are huge opportunities for women craftspeople. But people of Jawaja are missing the opportunities.

**CJ:** *Is there emergent leadership among the women?*

**AC:** Yes, they have a women's group. We plan to go there soon to see what these women want to do. What kind of products can they make? They probably would like to go into their traditional embroidery and find a market for that. We have not had contact with the women for some time. Although they came to meetings they usually kept quiet. No matter what we did to encourage them, the women were silent and the men did all the talking. So the women's group is a modest step that could have huge implications.

**CJ:** *Do you think that new meanings will be associated with craft activity? From my point of view, meanings are inherent in a process of making something, whether these are cultural, mythological, or personal meanings. Meanings also shift because of many influences.*

**AC:** The need for a shift of meaning has been with us from the beginning. I think those products from Jawaja have come to mean a sense of freedom, of true freedom. Not a freedom achieved but perhaps a freedom achievable. Demonstrated. Experienced. Real. And something for which other people cannot take the credit. NID cannot take the credit for what they have done. Their products demonstrate a context that is theirs and under their control. The potential is huge. Another strong sense of meaning, which their traditional products would not have given them, is that they are part of a team. We kept saying this is all about networking and building teams. We work as a team. You have a right to use institutions like NID and ask for services.

What we have not researched is the psychological and social impact on two generations of people in Jawaja. A generation has grown up for 20 years within this context. What has it meant to the young people that their parents were part of this experiment? What has it



changed for them? One man said, 'Everything has changed for my son.' Well, what has changed for his son? What does it mean for his wife who is now a member of the Jawaja association? We don't know what stories they are telling in their own community.

**CJ:** *What are some of the implications that have come from the way things were done in Jawaja?*

**AC:** It sensitised us in ways that we learned to ask questions that we were not raising before. We learned that first you have to ask: What do the people know that you should know before you even start asking questions? We also learned to ask: Do the people have some concept of tomorrow? If they don't, then development is meaningless. Because in Jawaja they didn't, their concern is survival, today. These people don't want to hear about other things because whatever you say, they will listen patiently, and when you leave they will be left where they were.

We learned to ask: Have we paused to reflect on what aspirations these people have? Are they the same as ours? Do they want to go where we think they ought to go? Others do not bother to find out what the people feel, what they aspire to. Or if they have, it is a superficial nod towards participation. In Jawaja, we asked people what they needed and they told us. Rather than throwing posters at people, we asked whether they could communicate in their own way, at their own level, in their own India, because that would give them a lasting communication resource. But very often project co-ordinators and donors want to know how many flipbooks or videos have been made. They won't ask how many people are standing on their own feet as a result of something you have done. The same with Jawaja, donors ask how many people have you made self-reliant? Where are the figures? Well, we don't know and we haven't any statistics. But what is the value of one person made self-reliant? Some people refuse to discuss it on these terms, but we push a bit further, saying, if that person was you or your child we would never say that's a foolish thing to have done. If we value each other as individuals then maybe we can say something significant has taken place.

When we started working in this field, we learned that the so-called development world is preoccupied with success stories, and donors want to replicate the experience. But they are usually looking for the wrong things. Learning doesn't take place in neat little project timetables. People and communities cannot be replicated, but learning can be extended. You learn more from failure than you do from success. And only the

next generation will see whether we have succeeded or failed.

I wish our intervention could have been better sustained in many ways. Somehow, compared to the need there, what we have done seems so little. But there are ripples. The educational process of the Jawaja experience transformed many people. One of the schoolteachers is now the head of a major NGO in Jawaja involved in greening that part of the desert. Students at NID were influenced enormously by involvement with Jawaja. All of us who were part of that team have gone on to do other things. The Scandinavian textile designer later applied this learning in Lapland and Finland. Another person went on to head a society for the promotion of wasteland development, and is now working for the World Wildlife Fund. One of the first volunteers at Jawaja is now an eminent professor of macro-economics at the Madras Institute of Development Studies. He said, I wouldn't be where I am today if it wasn't for Jawaja. This is the single most important learning that I've taken and applied to everything that I've done.

Personally, I have applied this learning in all the work I have done in communications in India, Pakistan, Columbia or Zimbabwe. I think I would not have been able to do any of that work without having gone through Jawaja.

For NID and IIM, Jawaja is the only deprived community we have served without a break for 20 years. It is such a wealth of knowledge and experience. When our colleagues from Jawaja join a discussion the whole quality of the discussion transforms because they bring insights and opinions, which are far removed from what we know. Although we are physically in the same country, we are almost from another universe.

Numerically the Jawaja project remains small but the craftspeople have enormous capacities and some have gone on to become entrepreneurs or join other enterprises, others have gone back into agriculture, but they take with them new knowledge and capacities. They are known in craft circles; they are seen and heard. Attitudes and the language used have changed enormously due to this interaction. The people of Jawaja have gone far as individuals and as a community and they are reputed as craftspeople throughout this country. When they walk into a Crafts Council meeting, they are respected and looked upon as the wise. Other people say, we are having this problem in Andhra or in Manipur; how shall we do it? To me this is very important because you come back to the fact that we who intervened are not the great resource people, they are.

# Cultural genocide?

KRISHEN KAK

TWO extended quotations provide a context for discussion. The first is from a traveller's account, 'Voyage to the East Indies' published in the mid-17th century. It describes the state of Indian artisanship at a time when India was celebrated as 'the wealthiest colossus of the world':

'The natives there shew very much ingenuity in their curious manufactures, as in their silk stuffs, which they most artificially [ingeniously] weave, some of them very neatly mingled with silver or gold, or both. As also in making excellent quilts of their stained cloth, or of fresh-colored taffata lined with their pintadoes (prints or chintz), or of their satin lined with taffata, betwixt which they put cotton wool, and work them together with silk...

'They make likewise excellent carpets of their cotton wool, in fine mingled colours, some of them three yards broad, and of a great length. Some other richer carpets they make all of silk, so artificially mixed, as that they lively represent those flowers and figures made in them. The ground of some other of their very rich carpets is silver or gold, about which are such silken flowers and figures as before I named, most excellently and orderly disposed throughout the whole work. 'Their skill is likewise exquisite in making of cabinets, boxes, trunks, and

standishes, curiously wrought, within and without; inlaid with elephants' teeth, or mother-of-pearl, ebony, tortoiseshell, or wire; they make excellent cups and other things of agate or cornelian, and curious they are in cutting of all manner of stones, diamonds as well as others. They paint staves or bedsteads, chests or boxes, fruit dishes, or large chargers, extremely neat, which, when they be not inlaid, as before, they cover the wood, first being handsomely turned, with a thick gum, then put their paint on, most artificially made of liquid silver, or gold, or other lively colours, which they use, and after make it much more beautiful with a very clear varnish put upon it.'

Moreover, most remarkably, as a number of foreign travellers at different times noted, all this 'excellent quality of products' was truly a marvellous display of handskills for it was achieved with the simplest and most basic tools; the Indian attainment, in fact, represented a 'complete victory of manual skills over tools and equipment.' That was till the mid-17th century.

In 1880, George Birdwood (then Art Referee of the Indian Section of the South Kensington Museum), could still describe, even while recording the onset of its destruction, the extant

crafts practice of Indian artisans as being in a 'tradition of a system of decoration founded on perfect principles, which they have learned through centuries of practice to apply with unerring truth.'

**N**ow, here is the Indian crafts scene summarised in 'India's Artisans: a status report' prepared by SRUTI, a Delhi-based NGO, in 1995:

'The current state of India's artisans is a matter of grave concern. These proud and industrious artisans were once the backbone of the Indian economy, providing much of the goods and services that our people needed. Today, these very artisans have been marginalised by the "modernisation" and "industrialisation" of society. Though some have managed to adapt to changing times, and a few have even thrived, most of them live in abject poverty with no prospects for a better tomorrow.

'Whereas the world must go on and things must change, the tragedy for the artisans is that most of these changes are not evolutionary, but brought about by external forces or influences, aimed at serving microscopic interests and replicating alien cultures and lifestyles. Therefore, the artisans have been deprived of those "stepping stones of history" which would have enabled them to move with the times, and to gradually adapt their skills and technology to changing circumstances. They have been denied the opportunity, not only to be a part of the "modernisation" and "industrialisation" process, but to contribute to it.

'As a result, today most of India's artisans are struggling for survival. Many have given up, and moved away from their traditional occupations. Others cling on desperately, not knowing what else to do or to whom to return. Their skills, evolved over thousands of years, are being dissi-

pated and blunted. Their progeny are not willing or able to carry on the family tradition, and a rich culture is on the verge of extinction.

'The new economic and industrial order that is emerging concedes no space to the artisanal sector. The powerful marketing machinery that is a concomitant of such an order progressively expands markets for "modern" goods and services at the cost of the 'artisans' markets. The research and development efforts in the new order are oriented towards developing capital-intensive processes which replace age old, human friendly, processes, rather than adapt them...

'Given the force of national and global economic trends, it is time to rethink the role of the artisanal sector in the Indian economy, and put it on the national agenda. If, as the trends indicate, this sector can only survive in pockets, then the nation's resources would be better spent in identifying and strengthening those pockets. To the extent this results in the unemployment of large numbers of artisans outside such pockets, a national initiative is required to reorient their skills and rehabilitate them. For, craft skills built up over centuries are an important national resource that cannot be jettisoned as dead-weight.'

What happened in these three and a half centuries that reduced India to a so-called 'developing' or 'Third World' country? What happened to all that wealth that made the Indian subcontinent one of the richest lands on earth? What happened to the centuries of crafts tradition and practice?

**T**he word 'manufacture' is from the Latin for 'made by hand', and India had a highly successful manufacturing economy. What happened, then, was the deliberate destruction by British colonial rule of this manufacturing economy and this, in the words of

Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, 'is the real, the fundamental, cause of the appalling poverty of the Indian people.'

As the SRUTI report indicates, this destruction is not yet complete. Its assessment, dismal enough, is that the artisanal 'sector can only survive in pockets.' It is wrong there. It cannot survive at all.

**F**or evidence, one has only to ask where the traditional artisans of Europe have gone. The traditional artisans of the Indian subcontinent are destined to the same end, and for much the same reasons. The Kashmir jamawar embroiderers are extinct. There are only three surviving families that still weave the Patan double ikat patola. Only one family survives that still makes the traditional Delhi blue pottery. There is only one surviving family that can still attempt the more complex laheriya tie-dyeing of Jaipur. And there is only one man in the entire Punjab who can still make the folk-sarangi. Paithani weaving of Aurangabad, kasuti embroidery in Karnataka, Chamba rumal embroidery in Himachal Pradesh, Farrukhabad silk printing in Uttar Pradesh, Toda embroidery in the Nilgiris, metal blockmaking in Varanasi, and many more crafts teeter on the edge of survival. Such is the contemporary state of crafts and traditional technologies in India.

In India today, we frequently hear loud and nationalistic noises about the strength and resilience of Indian culture and civilisation. Our civilisation, like many other pre-modern ones, is what may be called a terracultural civilisation, that is, it is rooted in *dharti mata*, literally, 'mother earth'. The modern experience of the West and our own experience of the last 350 years lead inescapably to the conclusion that Indian culture as it is traditionally and commonly under-

stood is doomed, just as all non-western cultures are doomed; that, seeded in Renaissance Europe and flowering in the New World of America from where it is rapidly spreading over the globe is a culture whose core-characteristics are rugged individualism, aggressive competition, and unfettered industrialism in which the human can be described as 'Homo agonisticus'.

These characteristics are completely opposed to those of the local and traditional cultures which it cannibalises. It is well to remember that there is no example known so far of any non-western culture escaping or surviving it. Even Japan, one of the most insular of nations has succumbed – a few of its artisans are preserved as 'national living treasures'; their communities have vanished. The McDonaldisation of China is well underway. What hope, then, can India have with its open borders and skies?

**T**he modern western worldview is the contemporary expression of the divine injunction recorded in the Old Testament to 'subdue' and 'have dominion over' the earth and 'over every living thing that moveth upon the earth.' It must be the correct worldview because, over the centuries, the West has indubitably subdued and exercised dominion over most of the earth. First it did so militarily and politically, now it does so culturally and ideologically. Victorian England in her time was the world's most powerful nation and therefore was considered the then acme of human and cultural evolution. Today this position is occupied by the United States of America. It is natural to kowtow to those more powerful and, by that fact, superior to one, and we copy the American way with fatal consequences for the craftspeople of our country.

The American anthropologist Lucy Garretson identified the essential character of American culture as the transformation of nature by rationality. It is now the model for the rest of us. But one can see what it does to us. If, as a terraculture, we believe we are part of nature and must live within her, by definition we are irrational, and consequently less evolved. In contrast to the western, the basic character of terracultures is a comprehension of nature and an endeavour to live in harmony with her.

**N**otice this in dance symbolism? Our dances are barefooted because we are dancing on our mother earth, we respect her, and the movements of our feet reinforce our connection to her. We derive our strength from her. And when our feet thump her, we remove our shoes which may hurt her. In contrast, the movements of the shod feet in ballet have steadily evolved to raise the dancers above the earth, to escape from the earth. Implicit in the description of our dances as 'exotic' or 'Oriental' is their 'ethnicity'. But has anyone ever heard ballet being described as ethnic? No, for it belongs to western culture which is (or should be) the universal norm!

If this appears far-fetched, consider artistic expression in gymnastics, synchronised swimming and similar games in the Olympics, all drawn from western conceptions of physical capability. The movements and music are all drawn from western dance and music. Why does no participant from any of the non-western countries attempt a performance with dance or music drawn from their own cultures? The answer is obvious – the rules are made by the West, and the day has yet to dawn when non-western cultural expression will be allowed and really acknowledged as creatively equal, or even superior.

This attitude, this approach, is possibly true all across the spectrum of western culture which is modern culture. The crafts in India emerged from and flourished as the earth-centred culture of which they were a part and expression flourished. It is inevitable that they will wither away as the earth-centred belief system withers away. And, as a culture withers, its practitioners die, the customs and usages die, the symbols and languages die, and ultimately its culture-bearers and core values die – or, at any rate, some of its superficial attributes will be preserved as curiosities in 'reservations' such as the ones for American Indians, or in the 'zonal cultural centres' that modern India is setting up.

**T**his is not to present a rosy, romantic view of tradition and a harsh critical view of modernity. Tradition has its evils and cruelties just as modernity has its blessings and advantages. Whatever the merits and demerits, our present concern is with the artisan and, for long term good or ill we do not know, but modernism and traditional community based artisanal culture rarely survive together.

In modern culture, creative and artistic expression is not community based, but essentially individual based. Earlier, creative expression was for the community's sake, and expressed a collective meaning understood by the community. Production itself was often a community activity: In Lucknow (Uttar Pradesh), for example, the production of an enamelled huqqa base would involve several different specialized skills, each practised by a different craftsman. One man (sunar) made the object; another (chitrakar or nakshiwalla) marked out the surface design; a third (chatera) chiselled away the depressions in the design needed to hold the enamel; a fourth (minakar) carried out the actual

enamelling; a fifth (jilasaz) polished the object; a sixth (mulamasaz) might gild it, while a seventh (jaria, muasia-kar, kundansaz) might set any stones required by the design. Successful teamwork of this sort clearly relies on a strong underlying design concept and a high degree of stylistic coherence, as well as a feeling of technical harmony amongst those responsible for each stage of the process.

The products today that resemble the kinds of products made earlier, or are derived from the techniques that made them are called 'crafts' or 'folk art'. This is opposed to 'fine art' which is art claimed to be for its own sake, and in which the artist claims the inherent right to determine the validity and meaning of artistic expression.

**T**he number of persons in India engaged in such fine art is minuscule, and their cultural impact is yet to be felt in any significant way. The number of persons in India engaged in traditional crafts was conservatively estimated at 9.5 million in 1961, reduced to 7.4 million in 1980 and, decreasing at the same (or, probably, a higher) rate must be, say, five million at the turn of the century. Even as their cultural importance is rapidly dwindling, the artisan population in India remains greater than the population of many European nations, and their human relevance must be of the highest significance to us because they are, quite literally, dying.

For example, reports make the newspapers regularly of suicides by starving weavers in Andhra Pradesh, which has a cybertechnie chief minister who prefers to call himself 'chief executive officer' in the American manner. While the situation is not yet as desolate as that described in 1834 by Lord William Bentinck, the English Governor General of India, that their 'misery hardly finds a parallel in

the history of commerce. The bones of the cotton weavers are bleaching the plains of India,' the trend is unmistakable. Each death is a diminution of the crafts community, and another log in the funeral pyre of artisan based culture.

**T**he British were the first rulers in the Indian subcontinent whose loyalty remained with their mother country and, for the factory based industrial prosperity of their own country, this loyalty enjoined on them the deliberate destruction of the enormously prosperous manufacturing – 'made by hand' – economy of India. As their Macaulay educated successors in independent India, not surprisingly we forward this process, rationalising it as the inevitable extinction of the unworthy before the juggernaut of 'progress'.

This is most evident in the complete absence over the last 50 years of any conceptual clarity in government planning and policy for artisans. The government simply does not know what to do with them. Expressed are pious exhortations and sanctimonious sentiments, but the plain truth is that we have absorbed the colonial mentality of the people being objects of policy and, coupled with a West oriented officialdom, are at a total loss in dealing with indigenous crafts and culture in any constructive manner.

Officialdom rests content with increasing figures of exports of Indian handicrafts; the steady decline in the actual number of artisans does not make it pause. It is the Indian middle class that from the early 19th century welcomed the use of British machine-made cloth, so contributing to the decline of Indian weaving. A greatly expanded and influential middle class, in tandem with the influential English language media, continues to lead in jettisoning its traditional moorings for

the glitter and glamour of the West and, as it does so, it invites our co-colonisation. What sincere interest can it possibly have in the livelihood of the anachronistic Indian artisan or traditional technologist?

If crafts as culture is almost dead, is there no hope for the five million or so – a few thousands will have died even while this is being read. History teaches us their situation is hopeless, that the modern western scythe mows them down to make its New World. This is what happened in the decimation of the Indians of North America. Now it is the turn of the Indians of India. The Indian subcontinent is home to the world's last major unbroken civilisation. Its transformation we are experiencing here is a slow cultural genocide. Perhaps the new Information Age that is just beginning to supplant the Industrial Age will, in former American President George Bush's immortal phrase, create a 'kinder, gentler nation'. What values will inform it and what kind of human will eventually populate it we can only speculate. Meanwhile, there are these five million artisans still to die.

**I**t is as human beings that, ultimately, we must address the concerns of these millions. Therefore, it is no longer as culture bearers that we must consider them, but as possessors of specific value representing skills which must provide them with a livelihood. The notion of crafts as culture, of a romantic interpretation of the crafts – broadcast by the Festivals of India that failed singularly to promote the economic welfare of the Indian artisan – must be eschewed. Even crafts as industry presents little hope for their survival as what Alvin Toffler calls the Second Wave spends itself.

In the world of the foreseeable future, it is only crafts as values that

presents the possibility of at least some of them swimming into the Third Wave. Craftspeople earn from their skills. True, these skills may have a cultural specificity, and where this can be turned to the advantage of the artisan, it must be encouraged. But to insist on the retention of the specificity is to convert artisans – as the Festivals of India did – into historical or tourist curiosities, denying them their stepping stones of history.

**I**n considering crafts as values, we must really consider the skills as symbolizing values, and not the products of these skills. It is these manufacturing skills the exercise of which provides livelihoods – the products are material expressions through which the skill is manifested, and the skill can manufacture different products as need or occasion demands. The profitable exercise of creative skills is possible only if there is a demand for them. A market for crafts skills, therefore, is the first requirement for the five million. When the traditional market that sustained these skills is dying and the new market has little place for them, a market needs to be developed. No matter how small or difficult this market, an effort must be made.

In India, there are five main players in this game, and their roles sometimes overlap: (i) the artisans themselves; (ii) the government; (iii) the business sector; (iv) mediating organisations, which in India are primarily nongovernment organisations or NGOs; and (v) the market.

The government expresses a good deal of sympathy for artisans, particularly around election time, but its actual policies and attitudes have steadily undermined the artisanal sector. When India became independent, the government saw itself as succeeding the maharajas as patron of the arts,

but it lost itself among confused and conflicting objectives and there is no likelihood of change here, nor any real institutional desire to change.

The business sector is primarily interested in the making of more money for its owners: artisans are relevant only as long as their skills produce golden eggs. Eventually, what happened to the goose that laid golden eggs? Greedily, it was cut open – and died. There are numerous examples of the shortsightedness of exporter-owners, abetted by the government, killing artisanal geese – Madhubani painting, Sanganer printing, bleeding Madras to name only three. We cannot hope for significant artisanal patronage and support from business.

**T**he traditional client and market operated under what is known as the *jajmani* or hereditary services exchange system, that is, the production of specific goods was the hereditary right of specific producing communities. Correspondingly, clients were under a socially sanctioned obligation to purchase only from these producers. Odd as this may sound to modern ears, this system had a vital advantage over the modern market system. Even during the worst of times, because producers and patrons had a strong societally enforced bond, there was always some employment for producers.

In the modern market, there is no such bond, and producers must compete with each other for clients. The losing producers therefore have no patrons, and they starve. In the America-driven competitive ideology of impersonal market forces, it is logical, foreseeable, and acceptable that losers fall by the wayside. Fostered by the myth of log cabin to White House, Americans believe, and we educate ourselves to believe, that failure is a consequence of personal weakness

and inadequacy. Ignored are social and historical factors that, even in America, control or, at any rate, strongly influence the average individual's station in life. And, let us face it, most human beings, by definition, are average people.

**A**ggressive competition has place neither for compassion nor morality; the single most important criterion of worth is money-making, and even artistic ability is usually gauged by the price the object commands. In such a situation, hand skills have no inherent significance, unless it can be translated into money. Their creative significance came from a different worldview, and in a market that was part of that worldview. In the post terracultural world, significance has to be injected into handwork, clients cannot be assumed but must be created, and the two ways this is done are through advertising and education.

Advertising is an essential instrument of the modern market system. According to news reports, the amount in 1998-99 as expenditure on advertising in America alone was estimated to be 200 billion dollars! Obviously, advertising interest in hand skills or the handcrafted product is only to the extent that they can be exploited to generate a return on this expenditure. Copywriters and mercenaries have much in common; they will write/fight for those who pay them more. Moral, social, cultural, ecological, or human dimensions are relevant only if they can generate more profits.

On the other hand, education is a much deeper and longer term process and those educators are most effective for whom it is a vocation – they believe in what they are teaching, and it is this belief, this conviction, they communicate. It follows then that education, that is, meaningful communication, is the crux of the creation

and sustenance of a demand for hand-skills – and so an educative commercial role is the most important one for NGOs in the contemporary Indian crafts scene.

It is a truism in America that the rootless individual seeks social identity through the possession of material objects, and market forces play on this need by projecting social meaning onto consumer products. Yet there is still enormous loneliness and alienation out there. This is only to be expected, since consumer products do not provide existential answers. In the ultimate assessment, we do not look for objects to fill our life; we look for meanings to justify it.

**T**he West scientifically searches for truth, exteriorly, through exploring the worlds outside us. Its confidence is unbounded, even presumptuous. Its rockets soar into the skies, conquering new frontiers; yet their afterblast burns away the spiritual core of that civilisation, leaving a hollow that no amount of luxurious living fills. The West increasingly turns to the East for the spirit – and we too are sending rockets up and away! In the afterblast burn our artisans, farmers, traditional technologists and all those whose lives are tuned into the rhythms of Mother Nature and Mother Earth.

Is this good or bad, right or wrong – who is to say?

We acknowledge the breakdown of the traditional jajmani system. The new customers for handskills are increasingly those whose worldly wants are readily met by industrially-produced goods. The ennui of satiable desire then is sought to be overcome not by advertising the mundanity of an object, but by imbuing it with supra-physical symbolism. Thus, as a modern teenage male in India, I drink celebrity-endorsed fizzy sugared water not because I am thirsty for this

healthful drink, but because by drinking it I hope to be identified as being 'swinging' and 'with it'. Or, as a modern teenage female, I wear skin-tight jeans with brand name boots not because they are comfortable in our sweaty climate but because by such clothing I hope to be recognised as 'cool'.

**O**ur pepsification in American jargon is called 'visionary selling' – creating and selling dreams and visions. Copywriters and celebrities have been profitably quick to realise that the new affluent customer needs not an object but a meaning, and the cultural (and colonial) meta-meaning dominant in India remains 'West is best'. Even though handcrafting traditions are rich in layered meanings, who is to be the copywriter for artisans? And how many artisans can afford to advertise?

In the modern Indian world, institutionally, it is perhaps now the NGO which must remind Indians of the meaning of life. Not the family, which is nuclear and whose members are increasingly self-centred; not religion, since the spiritual is subordinated to the temporal; not schools, since education still follows the industrial model, and there is little evidence of change; and certainly not government or business. The NGO must study and understand the traditional culture of production, it must study and understand the modern culture of consumption and its future, and then it must act as a catalyst between the two by helping traditional artisans adapt their skills to modern markets. It must use its expertise and experience to link the old producers and new consumers through interactive educational and commercial processes.

As modern Indians lose touch with the core value and beliefs of our civilisation, it is for NGOs to remind and educate us of these, how they

found expression through the handcrafting process and in handmade objects, how they evolved over 5000 years and can continue to evolve to meet new situations and exigencies, how they gave our existence meaning. And through the communication of this meaning, through meaningful communication, to sustain the idea of community, of human-ness and human inter-connectedness and to sensitise us to the meaning of the handcrafting process – a process that has physical, social, cultural, ecological, economic, moral, emotional, human and spiritual dimensions. And through this sensitisation, to a preference for handmade things. In brief, crafts as values.

**T**his is not philosophical speculation. It can be illustrated in many small and practical ways. Consider a very simple and worldly example – home-cooked food. The overwhelming majority of adult Indians will vote for homecooked food as their favourite food. And this is so for a very simple reason – the operative word is 'home'. There is a whole world of pleasurable meanings associated with home, and not the least is that the food was cooked by caring hands (contrast the industrial 'untouched by hand'). A second example is clothes stitched or knitted by members of the home. Again, handmade. One can go on – toys made by hand for children's play, gifts made by hand for festive occasions; in all of them, a common element is 'made by hand'.

What makes 'made by hand' special? It is made by another human being; it is evocative of, or is believed to be evocative of, human feelings that touch the heart; something of the maker always passes into that which is made, be it imagination, skill, or even the drop of blood that stains the fabric when the embroidery needle



pricks the finger. Made by hand reminds us of the human connection between producer and consumer and, no matter how high we soar into the skies, it is from earth substances that we are created, and it is to earth substances that we return. Therefore, it is through our connections to this mother earth that we must find meaning for our lives. And, making by hand is one such connection.

State policies and legal enactments can play only supportive or palliative roles. The state can at most be a catalyst, but half a century of free India has shown how ineffectively the state has performed. People cannot be forced to buy the products or skills of artisans and traditional technologists. In the long run, this obviously doesn't work. People must *want* to buy them, and this want can only be created through education in its widest sense. There are enough indicators that, in the markets of the Third Wave, 'hand-made' will represent increasingly valuable meanings. It is for mediating and concerned people and organizations to recognize and start from this opportunity.

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# Through history

VIJAYA RAMASWAMY

I WAS once in a shop in Kumbakonam. Since I was working on handlooms, I was looking for traditional designs. The man took out an absolutely 'razzle-dazzle'<sup>1</sup> saree and said, 'Madam this is the latest.' I asked him if it had a name, and he told me, 'Enter the Dragon.' There was I looking for traditional crafts in the heart of the weaving belt and what I encountered was this!

We have a demand for crafts of this kind on the one hand, and on the other we have people who turn up their nose at such things and say, 'this is not authentic.' So what is it that Dastkar or a similar NGO to restore? There is a sense of identity that makes things uniquely Indian. At the same time Indian craftsmen are trying to tie in, somewhere and somehow, with the market factor, both in textiles and crafts. With this self-reflexive story as an entry point, I would like to take you down the road of Indian craft history beginning from what Indian crafts were like 2000 years ago.

The earliest archaeological evidence of crafts goes back to the pre-Christian era. Metals like copper and iron have been found at certain megalithic sites in Tamil Nadu. Copper rattles, rings, bangles and rods, dating back to the first and second century AD have been found at Arikamedu<sup>2</sup> in Pondicherry. T.V. Mahalingam, leading the archaeological excavations at the lower Kaveri valley megalithic sites, had unearthed copper

\*The fieldwork on the South Indian craftsmen was made possible by a grant from the Indian Council of Historical Research.

1. Razzle Dazzle is the name given to the design that has zigzag lines somewhat like the effect of lightning.

2. B.B. Lal, Report on the Arikamedu excavations, *Ancient India*, no. 2, p. 104.



objects at Tirukkampuliyur and Alagiri, both in Tiruchirapalli district.<sup>3</sup> Kunnattur in Chinleput district<sup>4</sup> yielded copper artefacts such as utensils, bowls, bells and rings. Sanur in the same district yielded iron objects such as spears, daggers, knives, hooks, bars, wedges, arrowheads and sickles.

It is, however, significant in the context of metallurgy in Tamil Nadu that bronze is not found at the early megalithic sites mentioned above, but is available in plenty in non-megalithic sites. Adichchanallur and Korkai on the banks of the Tamraparani river in Tirunelveli district are both major sites for bronze objects. Adichchanallur, datable to the second-first century B.C. has yielded bronze bowls, pots, highly ornamental cylindrical jars and a huge bronze vase stand decorated with four rams having long horns which radiate from the centre of the vase base.<sup>5</sup>

In South India there are exquisite bell metal objects, characterised by their high content of tin. These crafted objects were not different from objects of aesthetic beauty. Beautiful things were not produced for their own sake. Everything had value and utility. Because man or woman is innately creative and cannot mechanically produce anything, what was produced carried its maker's aesthetic tastes and worldview.

There are literary references to the existence of crafts through the ages. There is a poem from the *Rigveda* that says that day and night come upon us

like a weaver moving the shuttle. In the Sangam period (early Christian era) texts, steel is used as a metaphor in poetry. References to the use of furnaces and bellows made of goatskin in the melting of iron and the making of steel is also referred to in Sangam literature. The *perumpanattrupadai* describes the kollan (blacksmith) blowing the bellows made of fine animal skin.<sup>6</sup> The Jain religious epic *Perungadai*<sup>7</sup> uses the burning of raw metal in the furnace as a poetic metaphor for mental purification. The raw iron mixed with sand was heated along with coal. The sand used in the smelting process was of a special variety.<sup>8</sup>

Crafts were a part of the everyday vocabulary of the Indian people. I would like to briefly quote from a poem by Andal, a 7th century mystic saint, a Vaishnavite. The following lines are from her composition *Nachi-yartirumozhi*, meaning 'the sacred words of the Nachchiyar', i.e. Andal. She is referring to Krishna: 'My beautiful lover, it is as if he has put clay around me and poured molten metal into my heart.'

6. *Perumpanattrupadai* 199-200 and 206 in *Pathupattu* ed. P.V. Somasundaranar, Saiva Siddhanta Kazhagam, Tirunelveli, 1971.

7. *Perungadai* cited in S. Velusami, 'Tamil Nagarigattil Irumbin Pangu' (in Tamil) in R. Nagasamy ed., *Tamil Nattu Varalattu Karutharang*, Varalattu Peravai, Chennai, 1979, p. 201.

8. It is noteworthy that iron and bronze melting techniques in South India have shown a remarkable degree of continuity. Hamilton Buchanan, writing around 1800, describes iron and steel smelting at Chennimalai in Salem district in an almost identical manner and says that the special sand was obtained from Viracholapuram in Gangayam district. Iron was then sold in the form of blocks or steel frames. See Buchanan, Hamilton, Francis, *A Journey from Madras Through the Countries of Mysor, Canara and Malabar*, 2 vols., London, 1807. The section on mining in the Salem district in volume one contains the above information.

Here Krishna is the craftsman and she the crafted object, the object of his love. The metal casting technique referred to here is what is called *ghanam* in Tamil, which is solid casting. Andal came from the heart of the metal craft producing areas: Nachiyakovil, Tiruchirapalli, Swamimalai, names we are familiar with. So this was a metaphor that was not far removed from her life and from the lives of people around her. Similar metaphorical usages occur in the writings of the eighth century philosopher Shankara. In his *Brahmasutrabhasya* (1,2,12) he uses the phrase: 'like images wrought of copper and other molten metal poured from a crucible into the mould.' The parable of molten copper assuming the shape of the mould is used by Shankara as an illustration of the mind flowing into and taking the shape of objects comprehended by the senses.<sup>9</sup>

In India, crafts was the specialised work of certain caste groups or communities. Moving directly to the period of the great temple building activity of southern India, I would like to show how a particular group or community would go up or down in social status depending on the economic importance of the craft work that they were doing. For instance, the earliest reference is to the *rathakaras* or to the *kashtakaras* because quite a few of the early buildings or temples were made of wood. When the technology changed from wood to stone, the carpenters or the *takshaka* (who were also known as the *rathakaras*) got socially pushed down and the *shilpis* moved up the social ladder. This shows that there is a nexus between the status a person or community occupied, the kind of work they did, and the

3. T.V. Mahalingam, *Report on the Excavations in the Lower Kaveri Valley*, Archaeological Survey of India, Madras, 1975.

4. A. Ghosh, *An Encyclopaedia of Indian Archaeology*, Munshiram Manoharlal, New Delhi, Two Volumes, 1989, pp. 243-44; 392-93.

5. Alexander Rea, *Catalogue of the Prehistoric Antiquities from Adichchanallur and Perumbalur*, Madras Government Museum, Madras, 1915.

9. Shankara's *Brahmasutrabhasya* is cited in C. Sivaramamurthy, 'South Indian Bronzes', *Marg*, vol. 33, pp. 56-72, 1979-80, p. 57.

kind of economic importance they enjoyed.

In the great temple building era temples were not merely sacred centres; they were also seats of power. When state formation took place every important kingdom would assert its grandeur through a deity who was larger than life, through a temple complex that virtually replicated the palace. This was something that began from the seventh-eighth century onwards: the sacred bolstered the secular. Hence the Brihadeshwara temple dedicated to Siva in Tanjavur is an example of the power of Rajaraja Chola being reflected in an enormous temple structure.

**W**hen a temple came into being it was not just a temple, but also a temple town. It had craftsmen, weavers, musicians and dancing girls. Almost every kind of professional was settled in and around the temple and the *tirumadaivilagam* that Tamil historians translate as a temple town emerged as the centre of craft activities. So began the process of what historians call rurbanisation,<sup>10</sup> because these towns despite their urban morphology had a strong rural constituent in terms of their resource base. There were agricultural areas all around and the craftsmen would be given small pieces of land in lieu of the services provided by them. In the midst of these would arise the temple town, with its many streets radiating from the temple and occupied by various craft/artisanal groups. Even to this day in the interior of Tamil Nadu in places like Nachchiyar Koyil (celebrated for its brass/bronze lamps and bells), one can find the streets of Kammalas (communities or caste groups identified with craft work in

South India) where craftsmen still live and practice their profession.

**B**uilding the temple would require masons (kal tachchan), carpenters (tachchan), and smiths (karuman/kollar). Gold smiths (pon kollar) and jewel stichers (ratna tayyan) who would make jewellery for the Gods and makers of icons or images of Gods (depending on whether the medium was bronze, wood or stone) had a special place in the society and economy of the temple building era. All these craftsmen were associated with the temple. Those craftsmen who were not part of this temple building were socially pushed down like the village blacksmith. There are inscriptions that refer to categories of stones that are revealing in terms of craft expertise and specialisation. There were male stones, female stones and neuter stones each of which could be used for different purposes.<sup>11</sup> There was in fact a category of craftsmen called 'Shila parikshika' whose task was just to examine these stones.

Another interesting fact about these temple sites, some of which continue to be regarded as sacred places apart from being archeological sites, is the presence of masons' marks on many of the stones. They appear like scribbles, but it is very rare to find inscribed names of the craftsmen who built the temples. Sometimes you find the name of the sthapati, the chief architect or the master craftsman, but not of the craftsmen working with him. In history, craftspersons were by and large anonymous; they did not sign their names. If I found a single name in a temple it was thrilling. Out of 300 inscriptions I would occa-

11. An interesting discussion regarding this aspect is to be found in J. Brouwer, 'Riddles of Raw Materials: Aspects of the classifications of stones and wood used by South Indian artisans', *Man in India*, Vol. 67, No. 2, June 1987, pp. 147-159.

sionally find the name of the patrons but seldom of the person who actually sculpted or crafted the object. The system of signing one's work is a practice that is of recent origin.

In South India, from the earliest period of icon casting in bronze, which would be from the seventh century onwards, that is the Pallava period, solid casting was the established practice. This is also known as 'cire perdue' or 'the lost wax' technique. In this process the object is first made in wax and then a thick clay layer made of special clay called *vandal* in Tamil is applied around it and allowed to dry. The mould is then heated and the molten metal poured into the hollow so that it fills every little crevice. The perfection of the icon would depend on this. After breaking the mould the finishing touches are applied to the idol with chisel and mallet.

**H**owever, the *tiruvasal* or circular halo around the icon, *pitha* or pedestal and the *vahana* animal mount used as a vehicle by the deity, were done by the hollow casting technique. In this process the entire details of the icon is worked out on the wax itself. A fine layer of clay that can make a clear impression of the wax model is built up. In the last stages of the heavy outer clay mould, a clay crucible is fixed. The mould would be provided with holes to facilitate the flow of the molten metal. The mould after drying is placed in the furnace heated to a relatively low temperature of about 300 degrees centigrade. The molten metal is poured into the space left between the original clay model and the outer clay covering with its fine wax impressions. After cooling the mould, the outer clay shell was broken and the hollow cast metal polished and refined.

Pallava bronze sculpture had its own distinctive characteristics of

10. This phrase coined by the economic historian Frank Perlin is a pithy and effective description of early towns, which had a strong rural component to them.

ovoid faces; tall headgear, and a tendency towards ornamentation as well as emphasis on looped waist girdles. One feature exclusive to Pallava sculpture was the *yajnopavita* (sacred thread) going over the arm. The Pallava images were also much smaller in size compared to the Chola bronzes. Some fine bronze specimens of the time of Nandivarman Pallavamalla (eighth century) are to be seen in the Vaikuntaperumal temple at Kanchipuram. The bronze Somaskanda image from Tiruvalangadu (now in the Madras Museum) represents the transitional phase from Pallava to Chola.

**T**he Chola bronzes mark the golden age of bronze sculptures in South India and more specifically in the Tamil culture. The bronze efflorescence happened under the patronage of the Chola queen Chembian Madevi in the eleventh century. Some of the most impressive bronze icons in the whole of India have been found at Tiruvalangadu (the most famous being the Nataraja icon), Gangaikonda Cholaapuram, Dharasuram and Kumbakonam, all in Tanjavur district belonging to the 10-12th centuries. The creation of bronze sculptures under the Cholas is divided into three distinguishable periods—early Chola, mid Chola and late Chola. Some of the chief characteristics of Chola icons were the rounded faces and tight modelling of the bodies. This fineness and refinement of features perceivable in the early Chola bronzes, however, gets blunted in the icons of the later Chola period.

The bronzes of the Vijayanagar period although prolific, are somewhat mechanical and listless in contrast to the early bronzes. Some of the finer examples of bronze sculpture in this period are the portraits of Krishnadeva Raya and his consorts at Tirumalai or the image of Parvati

datable to the 16-17th century which is at the National Museum, New Delhi.

**D**uring the Vijayanagar and later the Nayaka period, the bronzes became somewhat florid. One of the distinctive stylistic features was the numerous threads of the *yajnopavita* becoming more sinuous and ornamental. The elaborate shoulder tassels and circular decoration on the buttocks known as *prishta chakra* also constitute special features of the Vijayanagar bronzes.

Unfortunately, going back into history we can only talk about craftsmen. The craftswomen were not visible. They played a subordinate role. The woman was not the potter, but she was the one who kneaded the clay, and helped set up the kiln. In metal crafting, she did the polishing and the final details of the ornamentation. There is a reference in the Sangam period 2000 years ago to a woman potter, Veni Kuyattiyar, who was also a poet. But then, the Sangam period was unique in terms of the visibility of women from different walks of life.

There was some traditional industry where women dominated, like spinning. You do not find male spinners except in the hills among tribes like the Qazis or the Gaddis and here men usually use spindles when spinning. By and large, women always did the spinning, whether in India or in Europe. In fact, that is where the term spinster originates. In England the woman would spin and spin for her livelihood till she found a man to marry and protect her. The woman who did not find a protector or provider was a spinster. Basket weaving and mat making are other areas where women dominated. But historically if you asked where women figured in inscriptions as craftpersons, I would say they did not figure at all.

There were certain industries, which are now nonexistent, like armoury, where craftspersons were important. The making of swords was a work of art. The sword was not just a weapon, its scabbard was beautiful and the hilt jewelled. A lot of crafting went into the making of weaponry. Another such area was the mint. The *salyodharas* were socially important. They lived not in the temple complex but in the complex close to the palace. Neither of these crafts exists today. The place to find a jewelled sword now is the museum.

**C**raftsmen rarely had visible individual identities and always functioned within craft communities. Not any one could become a craftsman: he had to be born into a particular way of life. There is a quotation from Karl Marx in *Capital* about the Dhaka muslin weavers: 'It is only the special skill accumulated from generation to generation and transmitted from father to son, that gives to the Hindu, as it does to the spider, this proficiency.'<sup>12</sup> This is probably the most backhanded compliment that Indian craftsmen could receive, but it does show crafts to be a skill passed on from generation to generation.

Marx quotes with approval the account of Hugh Murray and James Wilson (*Historical and Descriptive Account of British India*, London, 1832, Vol. II, p. 449) 'The Muslims of Dakka (sic) in fineness, the calicoes and other piece goods of the Coromandel in brilliant and durable colours, have never been surpassed. Yet, they are produced without capital, machinery, division of labour or any of those means which give such facilities to the manufacturing interest of

12. Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. I, the English translation of the third German edition by Moore and Aveling edited by F. Engels, Moscow, 1958, p. 340.

Europe.' Marx goes on to point out that the division of labour even though it exists, is of several generations of craftsmen living at one time, and working together at the manufacture of a given article, the trades being hereditary.<sup>13</sup>

**C**rafting techniques constituted an oral tradition based on traditional knowledge systems. Many of these traditional techniques were reflected in high tradition, essentially Sanskritic, texts on crafts. In the course of my field-work I did get the impression that master craftsmen were quoting from *Shilpashastra* although the verses they chanted seemed to be received texts rather than something they had direct access to.

From the cultural viewpoint, what is also important is that for craftspeople, their tools were objects of worship. The loom for the weavers was sacred. On Vishwakarma day, which is the day of Saraswati puja during the *navratra*, no craftspeople will touch his tools. The tools are worshipped and divine blessings obtained for carrying on the craft. It is interesting that throughout India no industrial factory will work on Viswakarma day and car/scooter mechanics will not repair vehicles!

So far I have elaborated on the setup where in pre-industrial India craftsmen were comparatively free. They moved within communities, but these craft communities enjoyed a great deal of autonomy. Traditional Indian craft society operated within a kind of guild or *sreni* but that was nevertheless different from the European guild that was essentially an economic institution. The Indian craft guilds were

13. Ibid. For a discussion on the impact of the caste system on craft production see my article, 'The Masterweavers in South Indian Textile production', *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, vol. 28, part 3, October 1985, pp. 296 to 300.

corporate organisations grounded in social and cultural needs.

These craft and mercantile guilds were unique organisations that played a pivotal role in the socio-religious lives of craftsmen. The craft 'sanga' were important because they were a form of community support, a self-help institution of craft groups. If there was a marriage in the family of a poor craftsman, the rest of the community would come together and help him out. If there was a dispute in one family or between two artisan families, it was taken before the craft court—the *sangha* court, which usually held its meetings in the temple. These community courts would decide cases using their own standards for meting out social justice. Even today there are pockets in southern India, and possibly in the north, where craft *panchayats* function.

**T**he guilds would use collective bargaining as an effective weapon especially against heavy taxation but their economic objective does not seem to have extended beyond this. I would like to quote from Abbe Carre, a 17th century French priest who travelled through India. He was exasperated with the behaviour of craftspeople, and what he called their community arrogance. 'Among the kammala craftsmen—goldsmiths, blacksmiths and carpenters, there is a firmly established custom that if one of them is offended or wronged all the others shut their shops and abandon all their work.'<sup>14</sup> So collective bargaining was a powerful weapon in the hands of these corporate organisations.

Another point I would like to touch upon is the *karkhanas* or craft workshops. Moving to the 16th century Mughal *karkhanas*, the situation was very different from medieval

14. *Travels in India of Abbe Carre* edited in two volumes by Charles Fawcett, Hakluyt Series, London, 1948, vol. II, pp. 595-96.

South India. As in the Deccan Sultanates, the *karkhanas* were meant for turning out luxury products in the Mughal Empire too. These were not for the consumption of the ordinary man. Absolutely exquisite work was produced in the *karkhanas*. There was *meenakari*, or in Hyderabad the *bidri* work. In Golkonda diamond mining was always a state monopoly, and diamonds were produced in state *karkhanas*. But a craftspeople needs his freedom; and ironically these *karkhanas* were a high quality trap. If the craftsman was not seen working he was liable to be punished; there was a supervisor holding a stick over him and telling him what to do. There was excellence combined with low wages or virtually non-wages. There was no innovation. This was the situation in most of the *karkhanas*. Graphic accounts can be found in the *Ain-i-Akbari*. Along with the *Akbarnama*, there is a description of the lives of craftsmen, the wages paid and the discipline they were subjected to. The high quality trap of the Mughal *karkhanas* would equally be applicable to the Deccani Sultanates of Golkonda or Ahmednagar or Bijapur.

**P**atronage was an integral feature of the history of craft. Craftspeople were poor and needed someone who would appreciate their crafts and give it value. This was usually the job of kings and queens. Queens were important as great patrons of crafts. It was their patronage that made the Chola age the golden age of bronze icon making. Apart from royalty, military generals and upper class officials encouraged the crafts. Sometimes people commemorating the death of someone close would install an image in the temple. Sometimes a war hero was commemorated. Unfortunately, inscription after inscription gives the name of the patron but seldom of one who crafted

the object. With the downfall of independent kingdoms and the death of the monarchical system this kind of patronage was no longer forthcoming. The colonial stranglehold over Indian crafts and industry compounded the stasis that already existed in the sphere of craft production.

In modern times, patronage has come from organisations such as the Crafts Council or NGOs like Dastkar. Powerful and culturally sensitive individuals like Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay or Pupul Jayakar lent patronage to many a dying craft, bringing about a revival. A significant step in this direction is Dakshinachitra, which attempts to recreate traditional crafts in its original milieu. The experiment is the brainchild of Deborah Thyagarajan, Nalli Kuppusami Chettiar and others oriented towards culture care.

Freedom of expression is a vital aspect of crafting. This was possible only so long as craftsmen continued to work in their own habitat and had control over time and the products of their labour. During the colonial period however, governmental agents gained control over their production by the system of advances, what is known as the 'putting out system'. The greatest sufferers were those who were forced to weave according to the requirements of foreign markets.

This was around the 17th century by which time craftspersons had moved into the 'black town' located in the Company Presidency, whether it was Fort St. George of Madras or Fort St. William of Calcutta. Those of them who worked for Company wages were no longer in their own habitat. There was a strong sense of physical alienation arising from the movement away from the village to new craft towns. Further, to a large extent the craftsman was alienated from his own imagination.

This is where the Birdwood exhibition comes in. The imperial authorities felt that the Indian craftsmen had great ideas in their heads but they were not quite efficient. There was a need to recover and sort out ancient designs, classify them and use them appropriately. This function was performed by the Birdwood exhibition held around the 1850s. In some ways the exhibition organised by George Birdwood did laudable work, bringing together rare designs on print blocks from various parts of India. But it ultimately hit insidiously at the creativity of craftspersons.

In the Company records, a phrase begins to occur from this time onwards: 'Please make them weave to the perfection of the pattern.'<sup>15</sup> The perfection of the pattern went against the very ethos of the craftsman, for whom the craft object represented his worldview. If a weaver or craftsman digressed from this perfection of the pattern, what he produced would be rejected. As he worked on the basis of an advance, this could push him to desperation, even to the extent of committing suicide.

Asymmetry was and is an important aspect of the craftsperson's work. Symmetry on the other hand is in a sense artificial, as it breaks the natural beauty of asymmetry. I have an example of a saree produced by the Saurashtra weaving community from Uraiyur, an ancient weaving centre going back to the Chola period. The weaver of the saree had put together

15. This phrase occurs often in the Company correspondence but one instance is the letter dated 1696 regarding the musters sent to the weavers through the Company's Agent Mr Ongley - I.O. Archives, Letter Book IX, 466. This is cited in John Irwin, 'Indian Textile Trade in the Seventeenth Century: South India', published in *Studies in Indo-European Textile History*, ed. John Irwin and P.R. Schwartz, Calico Museum of Textile, Ahmedabad, India, 1966, p. 37.

two absolutely asymmetrical objects. One was an East India Company ship, and along with it, a traditional flower found in the south Indian conventional weave - a connection that only existed in his mind!

I would like to conclude with the freedom struggle in the 1940s. In between, for about 200 years, the craftspersons went through a grim period of anonymity and abject poverty. What was needed from India was no longer textiles, but raw cotton. There was unemployment and famine, a really black period for the crafts people. Lord Bentinck the then Viceroy, known for his humane treatment of Indians, stated that the bones of the cotton weavers were bleaching the plains of India. But during the freedom struggle, the *charkha* became an important symbol of the resurgence of Indian identity. Gandhi not only used it as a metaphor, he also used it as a powerful assertion - the right to a way of life. It was part of the Indian National Congress flag. There was a song of those times that my mother sang for me:

*charkha chala chala ke  
lenge hum swaraj lenge  
mulmal jo hai videshi  
us ko hum jala denge*

It was a song every Indian knew, it was in the popular imagination, it was part of our identity.

We are now at a crossroads. There is a tremendous consciousness that Indian crafts are important. But how do we assert its importance? How much do we yield to the needs of consumerism, the needs of the market, and the demands of global requirements? To what extent do we retain what is 'authentic' in Indian culture? This is where the larger question of 'culture care' comes in. The debate must perforce be an open-ended one.

# Market realities

JENNY HOUSEGO

SO many of the best things happen by chance—and my experiences of India and its fabulous textile crafts have been no exception. A textile historian turned exporter, I had all kinds of preconceived notions. These have mostly been turned on their head. I can only hope I am, perhaps, just a little wiser now.

*Patti-ka-kam* is a traditional work where patches of cloth (patti means leaf) are cut into motifs, usually floral, and stitched onto a background of organdie. This is a fine, transparent, stiffened fabric. Formerly this was achieved by an application of starch, and more recently by a mechanical process which ensures that the stiffness is retained after washing. This is much beloved by the ladies of certain parts of UP, particularly in the Rampur area, for their saris and dupattas.

*Bari-patti* (or the application of big leaves as opposed to the smaller leaves *choti-patti* appreciated in Lucknow) was introduced to us by a friend, an art historian, who was involved in research into the miniature paintings in the Royal Library at Rampur. She had organdie curtains made in the same way as a dupatta shown to her in a shop in the bazaar. Floating and transparent, with a shadowy design of swirling leaves and stems, these were glamorous in the extreme. A French friend who happened to be staying fell into raptures: 'This will be a huge success in France,' she said. 'Go for it.' So off we went,

driving several hours eastwards to the elegant, charming, if dilapidated city of Rampur. This was to be the first of many visits.

Here, in the depths of the bazaar, was the source. Into a tiny space were squeezed the owners, several blackly veiled ladies and a few smartly dressed customers. Bari-patti was what had brought us all here. Ravi, the owner, commissioned it from the veiled ladies who took it home to make, and brought it back for him to sell to the smart ladies. We were there to see if we could start a production unit.

Some hours later a deal had been struck, several pieces of bari-patti curtains, tablecloths and napkins in different designs ordered, and delivery promised within an agreed time.

Weeks later part of the order arrived. With the enthusiasm of beginners, we had taken a large order for organdie bari-patti napkins from one of New York's most elegant shops. There was no time to be lost; the shipment was already late; the napkins had to be cleaned, labelled and packed immediately. The whole company (then numbering about ten people including us) knuckled down to work. But oh dear. Each napkin was different in design and, worse, in size. The sides were not straight, the hems worse, the stitches unbelievably uneven. We gulped; go ahead and risk ridicule, or cancel the order and lose face? Either way we lost. But as these

products were so very unusual and new, perhaps, just perhaps, our clients would accept them. This seemed the only hope.

**W**e sent the shipment to London for handing over to the agents there who would send it on to the US. But again, oh dear no. Goods of non-European origin cannot be sent via Europe to America, but only from the country of origin. I myself brought the whole lot back again to Delhi. They had not improved during their absence, and were perhaps more shockingly inadequate than ever. However, here was a chance to redeem ourselves and our otherwise surely lost reputation. They were straightened out, re-stitched, the worst of the patches put on again. Out they went again, to a delighted reception in New York. Our future, from unlikely beginnings, seemed set.

But this was not to be. We worked away improving quality, doing new designs and consolidating our market for about a year and a half. Competition then presented itself in a major way, with several companies copying our work – in one case down to the packaging and labels. The only difference was that our name had been substituted by another one. Our creation had been taken over, the copyists selling at much lower prices than we could do ourselves. We had gone through the development, the costs of all our mistakes, the running up and down from Rampur improving design and quality, the smooth running of Ravi's workshop. Above all we had created a voracious market. It was easy for others to move in.

This, however, was in many ways the great opportunity for many Indian companies. Organdie is cheap, easy to work; if not too bothered about quality, then it is possible to feed the demands of foreign buyers at a good

price, and make a handsome profit oneself.

But I sought perfection, high quality, and a product that was just right. Ravi and his ladies were being propelled into an industry far from the small, laid back cottage craft for a small, not overly quality discerning local market. Yet it worked. They grew into their roles, they performed and got it right, and Ravi's workshop went from strength to strength. This in itself was an achievement.

By education and experience I am a historian of textiles. Inevitably, living in India, I became more and more interested in textiles as part of a deeply ancient but living tradition. I wanted to look at all this, to study the past through the present. Soon it was the present that became the study. With my former journalist husband David, I established a company called Shades of India, the philosophy of which was to work with the best of traditional textile craft skills to create textiles for the home, for a contemporary minded, up-market customer. I believed that I could carry my historical past into the present.

**I** had always been fascinated by the so-called Fostat textiles, hand painted and block printed fragments excavated from the rubbish dumps of old Cairo. These were believed to have been made in western India for the Egyptian market. Carbon dating has shown some of them to be as early as the 12th century. As it happened, Mohammad Bhai Siddiqui the famous master from Kutch in Gujarat of *ajrak*, double sided block printing in natural colours, was working for a month in the demonstration area of the Crafts Museum in Delhi. I showed him illustrations of some of the Fostat pieces in museums about the world. He studied these with great interest and announced that although he had no

such blocks now, these designs were very much part of his tradition, and he could certainly recreate them. He was as good as his word. In the allotted time, a parcel arrived from Damadhka in Kutch and inside, in the original indigos, madders and yellows, were some Fostat tablecloths. I was thrilled, certain that our buyers would be likewise. But it was not to be. This was ten years ago, when the West's perception of India was still that it was cheap and cheerful.

**T**he bari-patti had done little to change that perception, except that it is was glamorous and new. Organdie is inexpensive, and fairly unskilled hands can do the appliqué work of leaves. But block prints were also expected to be cheap, even if these were quite different from the usual, and in natural dyes. Colours should be exactly the same each time, never mind the different weather conditions during dyeing, the difficulties in removing the cloth from the indigo bath at exactly the same moment for every batch, the vagaries of the alternative technology of Ismail Bhai, one of the sons of Mohammad Bhai, who used a weed killer spray to apply turmeric to his cloth as it lay on the ground in his field. Specialist shops approved, but for the main the market did not respond because they judged the prices too high, and we did not get the orders we had hoped for.

I had had a wonderful time over two or three visits to Kutch, learning about natural dye methods and block printing techniques. But commercially it did not work; I had not succeeded in increasing the income of this wonderful family, and had thus wasted its time.

Since that time the Gujarat earthquake has struck, killing Ismail's mother and daughter. Their home, their workshop and many blocks were



destroyed. The communal riots have raged. Yet recently Ismail was in Iowa in the US where, I have heard, he was given an honorary doctorate, and has been lecturing on his work and on natural dyes. His father died some years ago, but he and his brothers have taken on his business and achieved the fame that their work richly merits. I am full of admiration, and of gratitude for all they taught me, not only in terms of craft but also for their kindness, humanity, their warmth and impeccable manners. Also for their determination to rebuild their lives when all must have seemed so hopeless.

**T**wo very different stories, and there are of course many more. Travelling widely in different parts of the country, I came across many wonderful things, which I tried to develop into products for an upmarket, discerning clientele. I moved through many different areas, each one with wonderfully exciting textile craft skills. But I was not there to follow everything up, to encourage, to get orders out on time, and working long distance, my efforts never really took off. Orders have to be delivered on time or else they are cancelled, and then everyone is worse off than they were before.

Finally, I had to agree that trying to organise and keep production going in widespread parts of India, despite my best efforts, was really not possible to manage. This was probably my own fault. My standards of quality and timing were doubtless unrealistically high. No matter if there was a wedding, a celebration or whatever else, so much part of the fabric of Indian life, work had to go on, the delivery had to be there on time, adjustments would have to be made so that the work was completed. I was constantly frustrated! Little by little I learned patience; let us allow all the time needed to accommodate these inevitable dis-

ruptions, let us be realistic. But it still did not work; even where there seems to be a lot of it, time remains elastic. The company was losing money in these delays, inconsistent quality, and cancelled orders.

**N**ow Shades of India, like many other companies here, does most of its work in and around Delhi. We created embroidery centres in villages in Haryana where previously there had existed no employment for women; in one village it worked so well that we were approached by the *pradhan* in a neighbouring village, a formidable lady whose role was to protect the rights of women, to ask if we might set up a centre in her village also. This we did, and now she runs it completely. Otherwise cutters, tailors, stitchers, *ari* embroiderers and others, are all in and around the city. Everything is beautifully made, by hand, in a manner that is relatively easy to organise and control. Some handloom fabrics come from different parts of rural Madhya Pradesh. Production is certainly easier, but it lacks the extraordinary diversity of techniques that would have been so exciting to incorporate.

A couple of years ago, I embarked on another venture together with a Kashmiri friend of longstanding, Asaf Ali, and his two brothers. This, for me, meant going right back into the grassroots of craft. The family in Kashmir has long been involved in handicrafts, particularly in textiles. We decided to pool our talents, and establish the Kashmir Loom Company, with the aim of reviving and developing traditional weaving and embroidery in Kashmir, and to bring to these new life with a contemporary look. At the same time we seek to help restore to Kashmir its once unrivalled reputation as the home of the best shawls the world has ever known.

This is completely fascinating. Here we are concentrating on just one region – though each time we think we have surely seen everything, another ravishing technique appears. The sheer artistry that craftsmen bring to their work and their ability to adapt to new ideas while remaining true to their ancient traditions, whether in weaving or embroidery, is astounding. This is a remote land, cut off from the rest of India by high mountain ranges, and so it has always had an isolated existence.

Kashmir has long been famed for its extraordinary shawls. The Emperor Akbar owned several. The export of these started in the second half of the 18th century; the Empress Josephine, wife of Napoleon of France, had a large collection, and many portraits depict her draped in a shawl, with others cut up to form her dress. The fashion continued until the 1870s to the extent that no lady of taste would dream of going out without one draped over her shoulders. By this time European style insisted on ornate, elaborate patterns and thicker textures which show a marked departure from the earlier, Kashmiri style with borders of elegant Mughal type flowering plants.

**A** variety of events conspired to the demise of the 19th century Kashmir shawl; high taxes imposed by its rulers, fierce competition from the dobby and then the Jacquard looms of Europe, of which Paisley is the most famous since it gave its name to that very traditional of Indian motifs, the *boteh*, a kind of cone with its top curled over; European wars, which made importing very difficult. But most devastating of all, the fashion for shawls died. This spelt the death of the beautiful, hand woven *kani* shawl that had fed a greedy market for over a hundred years.



Now, more than a century later, the Kashmir Loom Company is having a small hand in reviving this extraordinary technique, and kani shawls are once again being woven. Even if the weavers are not willing to undertake the production of shawls as fine as the best of the past, the achievement is considerable. Such shawls are extremely expensive; it takes two weavers over a year to complete one shawl, each pattern detail painstakingly worked by hand. Yet there is a market, both within India and outside. There are wealthy customers who want the very best, the most beautiful, who have the means and, more, are ready to spend it on items of great beauty and rarity.

**S**hawls made for the lower and middle markets have been enjoying a huge demand. But once again, the fickle fashion in the West for shawls has recently much diminished. Clever producers in Nepal came up with a fabric woven with pashmina mixed with silk. This could be dyed in every colour. They were expensive, but silk/pashmina shawls ruled the market; no buyer could get enough of them. The market soon saturated; the shawls were produced more and more cheaply, now in India as well as in Nepal, the content more and more doubtful. Then bang. The fashion was finished, demand stopped, and no buyer will now touch them. Pashmina has become a dirty word through absolutely no fault of its own but because of greedy, foolish marketing. I saw a street side booth in London the other day selling shawls advertised as 'pure pashmina: 100% acrylic.'

Pashmina is a wonderful, soft wool, combed by hand from the *changra* goat. They are reared in herds at over 14,000 ft in the arid, high altitude plateaux of Ladakh and Tibet, as also in Mongolia. It is also known as

*cashmere*, the old spelling of the name of the region. It could only be spun and woven in Kashmir — no other part of the world has the appropriate skills to do this — and thus, although the wool itself does not come from Kashmir, this alternative name has also stuck. Foreign buyers now want only cashmere, as though it was totally different and not tainted by the word pashmina. Few know that these are in fact the same! A gossamer fine pashmina yarn can only be spun by hand. In other places, where there is only mechanical spinning, it has to be mixed, with silk, wool or a synthetic yarn that can be carbonized after weaving. It is thus never the same.

All of us who spin and weave pashmina in Kashmir should do our best to get together to form an organization to protect the processing and the reputation of this delicious fibre. To make it official, register pure pashmina as a trademark, and only items that bear the appropriate stamp should be deemed the real thing.

**B**ut is this possible? Is it possible in a state devastated by years of strife? Where Kashmiri craftsmen, even master embroiderers who have been awarded major prizes, sell alongside their own wares cheaper imitations from Amritsar and elsewhere? The wheel has gone full circle. In the 19th century it was the Jacquard looms of Paisley and elsewhere in Europe that had such a hand in killing the Kashmir handloom industry. Today, it is the Jacquard looms of Amritsar that are churning out machine woven copies. The merchants who order and sell them are often themselves Kashmiri, and assure their customers that these are the real thing, hand woven in Kashmir. They are destroying the reputation of Kashmiri hand products and their market. Alongside the Jacquard shawls there are also cheap em-

broideries made goodness knows where, masquerading likewise under the famous name.

Thus Kashmir needs all the help it can get to protect and maintain its crafts and its craftspeople. Life goes on in the region in spite of terrible unrest, problems and depression. Many hands are still hard at work. Master craftsmen are highly respected, many of them carrying on the ancient Sufi tradition where their craft is their meditation. Young men are coming into the business because even now a good livelihood can be made. This is all very encouraging in a state where for most other reasons the future seems so insecure.

**T**here is still huge talent in craft skills all over India. What is needed is a transformation in marketing strategy. No attempt should be made to revive craft without this; NGOs and other organisations can no longer dig their heads into the sand. The days of association of craft with charity are long past. People buy hand made things because they are beautiful, individual, and unique. There is a huge market. But much of it needs educating. Hand made does not mean cheap; it means beautiful, well made, individual, different. It can afford to be expensive.

Crafts people should not be frightened of charging good prices for their work. If they are to stay where they are and not move to other activities, then they have to ensure a good standard of living, and one in which their children will be happy to follow. Otherwise it will surely die, as it has done in most of the rest of the world. The final word should be that of a lady in one of our village embroidery centres in Haryana: 'We are all so relieved that you are a private, commercial company,' she informed me, 'because you have to make money, and therefore so will we.'

# Surviving in a globalizing world

APARNA BHAGIRATHY and NIRMAL SENGUPTA

THE World Bank estimates that two-thirds of the world's population cannot survive without foods provided through indigenous knowledge of plants, animals, insects, microbes and farming systems. The World Health Organization informs that up to 80% of the world's population depends on traditional medicine for its primary health needs. No international organization has brought out, as yet, the importance of crafts in the livelihoods of poor people.

We know that in India the crafts sector comes second in employment generation, outranked only by agriculture. Led by such facts, crafts are usually viewed as relics of the past, still existing only to cater to the livelihoods of the poorer sections. The promotional activities in this sector have been directed towards decorative production or for tourist attraction. People like Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay put crafts on the map and gave the sector its prestige. Only in one area of policy – employment, income generation and poverty alleviation programmes – are crafts taken seriously.

While agreeing that this emphasis is just, we must also pay attention to the other potentials of crafts.

The commercial potential of crafts in modern markets is immense. Crafts and craft based industries are India's highest export earners. This is not surprising since the competitive edge in today's globalized world is obtained primarily by capitalizing on specific skills rather than mere labour intensive production. Along with the skill content, the crafts sector also embodies valuable traditional knowledge that is rarely appreciated. No doubt, macro industries and hi-tech mechanized production are favoured over small-scale village industries and indigenous technologies. But with the development of new technologies and global markets, elements of traditional knowledge are also being appreciated as resources of actual or potential value.

A related question that arises in the context of value addition and technological development of crafts is regarding the role and recognition of rights of the craft persons. Global

efforts for protection of intellectual property rights over such valuable knowledge are also on the rise. This is better known for indigenous genetic and medicinal knowledge, but on a lesser scale, is also present in craft. Like in the case of biodiversity and folk medicine, consolidation of commercial potential of crafts in a globalizing world has two dimensions: (a) creation of value through technology improvement and (b) sharing of the benefits by means of intellectual property protection. This article discusses these two issues, indicating some of the support measures that are necessary for reaping the commercial potential of crafts in an increasingly globalized world.

Some of these may appear as largely export oriented measures which, one may feel, need not be the primary purpose for the production of crafts. But this is no longer true, for globalization has brought with it more competition. Even if export is not the purpose of production, crafts still have to be export worthy to survive. In the WTO regime the distinction between domestic and export markets is becoming increasingly vague. In the domestic market itself, many crafts will have to compete with freely imported foreign goods, just as much as they have to in any foreign market. So, even if the primary purpose of craft development is poverty alleviation, the programmes have to take into account this globalized feature of markets.

**E**very area, every community has a different tradition, a different need and a different capacity. In the past, the craft community was linked to a consumer community that was close by, and locally accessible materials were used to cater to the local demand for products. Globalization has changed the need for localized activities. The

value of crafts must be perceived in the light of new potential uses in these changing contexts. But before we enter into a discussion about value creation, from a commercial perspective we must take note of the significance of crafts in culture and religion.

Many craft items have both use value and cultural value. Market, or globalization in any form, may come into conflict with the cultural standards. Neglect of the intrinsic and inherent value to owners/artisans resulted in severe discontent which, of course, found expression only in those countries where rights of craftspeople are recognized. The nature of debates over the use of some Australian aboriginal designs that were considered as sacred, outside the traditional context, without gaining prior consent from the concerned community may be appraised from the following cases.

**A**s early as in 1974, reproduction of a painting by Bulun Bulun on T-shirts was challenged as a copyright violation under the breach of the Trade Practices Act of Australia. The court granted injunctions and the dispute was settled for the sum of A\$150,000. The landmark judgment extended the copyright law for the protection of community rights of the indigenous Australians in artistic creations. Bulun Bulun admitted that he owed a fiduciary duty to the traditional owners to preserve the knowledge by guarding against infringements of copyright in the painting. If he did not, the custodians had rights to compel him to preserve the integrity of the community's culture and ritual knowledge.

In 1991, the Dolina Fashion Group was accused of copying an aboriginal painting onto fashion dresses. This case was settled out of court and the remaining stock destroyed. Yumbulul alleged that no per-

mission had been granted to reproduce the totem pole, 'Morning Star', onto the \$10 bank notes. Action against the Reserve Bank was settled by agreement. There are numerous such designs/motifs specific to communities, such as in the North East region of India that are not open to use by non-members or outsiders of the community. Their valuation must not be made in market prices.

**C**ommercial value of knowledge and skill is related to its application and market potential. Value may be enhanced either through an improvement in technology and/or by linking the production to the market requirements through efforts to market the product. There is no single model applicable for all crafts. The processing and manufacturing of craft products like leather goods evolved over centuries, responding to local needs, using locally available materials and creating local variations. The markets were typically small and sharing of knowledge and techniques limited in the absence of strong links with larger, modern markets. The traditional communities preserving and practising the techniques were unfamiliar with the methods of commercialization of ethnic products in relation to the tastes and preferences of the modern market. Trade was not global, designs were static and restricted to the local market.

Modern markets are just the reverse. These are very dynamic and the demand for ethnic leather products temporal. In complete contrast is the textiles sector that has been extremely dynamic and globally linked over centuries. In world textile trade, India was once a world leader. Techniques that originated in India are now widely found in other parts of the world. In domestic demand and exchange of technological knowledge, the textile

sector has remained vibrant. Technology upgradation and development need to be based on an understanding of the current position and requirements of the sector.

**T**he leather technology upgradation mission of the Central Leather Research Institute synergised the traditional wisdom of the leather artisans with relevant modern science and technology and industry requirements. The problem was in linking the production of leather products to the requirements of the modern market. The development and marketing of the Kolhapuri footwear, an ethnic product, is an interesting example. The main problem with the Kolhapuri footwear is the lack of standardization in quality. This is due to a mismatch in the material and the variations in size. On analysis of the conventional practices, it was found that it was the practice of having to first wet the leather and consequently wait for it to dry that resulted in lower productivity.

As a first step it was demonstrated that this process was actually not required and doing away with it by procuring better quality leather would automatically result in higher productivity. Pertaining to the problem of size variations, standard size lasts were designed with computer-aided methods and templates for the bottom patterns cut out from metal sheets and distributed to the artisans. With support from NGOs, the required market links were also established.

A question that is frequently asked is, 'Why do craftspeople with centuries of skilled tradition need outside intervention at all?' Tradition must be a springboard, not a cage; and if craft is to be utility based and economically viable, it cannot be static. Crafts are constantly evolving, but they must also respond to changes in

markets, consumer lifestyles, fashion and usage. In responding to these changes in markets, lifestyles and usage, it is the role of designers and other agencies that serve as mediators that assumes significance in sensitively interpreting these changes to the craftspeople.

Craftspeople cannot afford to keep samples and have rarely seen what their forefathers made. The value of crafts may be enhanced by incorporating modern techniques where suitable, after a careful analysis of the processes involved and the requirements of the markets. In some cases even modern techniques are not required – forgotten old techniques may need to be revived. But again, this is an area where outside intervention is necessary.

**F**ollowing a ban by the European Union on imports of products using Azodyes, the potential for using natural dyes in a number of export earning sectors is immense. One of these is the large Indian carpet exporting sector. Use of natural dyes is an old technique but almost forgotten. An NGO, the Society for Employment Welfare and Agricultural Knowledge (SEWAK), engaged in a project for reviving traditional carpet weaving among the Bhotia community in the Kumaon region of Uttar Pradesh is trying to revive use of natural dyes. It finds that the price of these natural carpets are 300 per cent higher than the synthetic ones today. The project that started in 1996 with two families now involves more than fifty families.

In the globally linked textiles sector, the technology upgradation programme of the government is one of mindless imitation of technology prevalent elsewhere, without paying attention to the requirements of the processes in the sector. As a contrast, we will cite here some private initia-

tives directed to use traditional knowledge of craftsmen. There is an old proverb among the artisans claiming that the quality of the fibres in the cotton bud is far superior to those in any other stage of subsequent processing. The group investigated and came to believe that there is some truth in the saying. The spinning mills in the five largest cotton producing states are able to absorb only half of what is produced. Cotton is transported in bales to the mills for the production of yarn. A careful study of the process revealed that cotton was transported in bales in the past only for the purpose of ease of transport, for it had to be shipped all the way to England.

The AU-PPST group decided to use the folk knowledge of the cotton craftsmen as the prior art for technology development.<sup>1</sup> By now the group has developed a machine building on this basic fact. The processing is initiated at the seed level itself, thereby minimizing the damage and cost due to baling and transportation. Further, since the quality of the cotton at the start is also higher, a much simpler process is sufficient. If the machine is deployed in the five largest cotton producing states and the yarn produced at the place where the cotton is grown, instead of having to export it to other states, it is estimated that the returns are likely to be much higher. This example highlights the importance of a careful study of the current technology and identifying the requirements of the sector before adopting or applying new technology. The needs of this sector were of localizing the technology, in sharp contrast to the needs of the leather sector.

**W**ill the benefits from such technological developments and additional value generated reach the craft persons and artisans? Is there a mechanism to ensure that the benefits are

transferred to them? In the seminar on traditional knowledge,<sup>2</sup> Deborah Thyagarajan exposed our indifference by describing an incident. Art prospectors popularize Indian designs with the support of craft organizations. In one such programme at the Delhi Craft Museum, an artist from Madhubani demonstrated the techniques of Madhubani paintings. A French designer purchased the demonstration piece at a small price, which she subsequently used in one of her designs in her country. As acknowledgement of the original contribution by the Madhubani artist, she sent a cheque of above Rs 100,000 back to the artist. On further usage of the design, she sent an additional amount of Rs 250,000.

This is something of a precedent in our country, where it is usually assumed that designs are common domain for everyone and imitation is rampant. Not many may feel the necessity or the obligation to pay for using someone else's design for commercial exploitation. In the process the design is made cheap, and everybody loses.

**C**onsequent upon the long history of protection of intellectual property rights, in Australia a substantial share of fund goes to the custodians. The total value of the aboriginal art market in Australia is around A\$200 million per year. Half of the sales are related to the tourism market and of the total aboriginal art trade, A\$50 million is estimated to reach the aboriginal producers directly.

1. As described by L. Kannan of AU-PPST at the Workshop on Traditional Knowledge – Appreciation for Policy Making, 25-26 March 2002, IIC, New Delhi.

2. Roundtable on Indigenous (Traditional) Knowledge held on 28 August 2001, at the Madras Institute of Development Studies, Chennai.

In the U.S., a 1935 Act adopted criminal penalties for selling goods with misrepresentations – i.e. when they misled people into believing that they were (American) Indian produced. Although this law was in effect for many years, it provided no meaningful deterrent to those who misrepresented imitation arts and crafts as being (American) Indian produced. In addition, it required 'willful' intent to prove a violation, and there was very little enforcement. In response to growing sales of products misrepresented or erroneously represented, in the billion dollar U.S. indigenous arts and crafts market, the Congress passed an act, essentially a truth-in-advertising law designed to prevent marketing products as 'Indian made' when the products are in fact, not made by (American) Indians as defined by the Act.

**I**ndia has introduced and modified its IPR laws to take care of traditional knowledge – largely biodiversity and medicinal knowledge. Crafts have not been given much consideration. We will discuss what protective provisions exist or are needed for crafts. In extending IPR protection to the crafts sector, several legal and operational issues arise. Identification of the craft sectors for protection, documentation for creating a record of rights, improvement so as to conform to the requirements of IPR laws, comparing the existing customary laws, protocol regarding access and use and transfer of folklore are some of the issues under discussion.<sup>3</sup>

Even the terminology is open to many explanations: Crafts are taken to include handlooms, handicrafts and other rural based cottage industries.

3. UNCTAD-background note on Systems and National Experiences for Protecting Traditional Knowledge, Innovations and Practices.

What items can be given intellectual protection? The 'indigenous' or 'local' parts alone qualify for IPR protection. Indigenous knowledge (IK) not only refers to the knowledge of indigenous peoples, but also to that of any other defined community. The connotations vary across regions. Often, crafts are subsumed under the larger category of folklore. For the purposes of the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) activities, expressions of folklore include handicrafts and other tangible cultural expressions. WIPO defines 'tangible expressions' to include 'drawings, paintings, carvings, sculptures, pottery, terracotta, mosaic, woodwork, metal ware, jewellery, basket weaving, needlework, textiles, carpets, costumes, musical instruments, architectural forms.'

**E**xisting international provisions include several international agreements that have been formed for the protection of folklore and rights of the holders of expressions of folklore. An Intergovernmental Committee on Intellectual Property and Genetic Resources, Traditional Knowledge and Folklore was established under WIPO to specifically consider the emerging issues of intellectual property protection pertaining to the three themes. The Tunis Model Law on Copyright for Developing Countries (1976) is an earlier effort towards protection of works of folklore. The Model Provisions for National Laws on the Protection of Expressions of Folklore Against Illicit Exploitation and Other Prejudicial Actions were adopted in 1982 under the auspices of WIPO and the UNESCO.

Several countries have used the model provisions as a basis for national legal regimes for the protection of folklore. However, it is recognized that the scope and impact of the model provisions is limited and

it has been suggested that they be updated. There exist other similar initiatives to extend legal protection of folklore. However, these are often limited in scope and impact. There is no internationally binding legal agreement for the protection of crafts and the rights of the artisans. Where the existing mechanisms can be interpreted in a manner such that legal protection is extended to crafts, there is absence of an enforcement mechanism.

**W**ith the standardization of IPR regimes across countries through the Agreement on Trade Related Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS), there has been discussion on possibilities for extending the existing IPR provisions for the protection of crafts. Some that may be applicable are industrial designs, geographic appellations of origin, copyrights and trademarks. Some of the state governments are already involved in extending protection to some traditional craft products. The Geographical Indications Act was passed in 1999; however, in the absence of Rules for the Act, there is still uncertainty regarding the procedure through which such protection may be claimed and used.

Geographical Indications is a commercial right that can be used to enhance the ethnic value of a craft product or design. It does not protect the knowledge or the underlying technology but it does prevent the use of the name in a way that misleads people about the true geographic origin of the product. The Tamil Nadu State Government Department for Handloom's and Textiles has identified some traditional craft products and studied their characteristics and techniques of production in detail so as to determine if they can qualify for GI protection. One such product is the Kancheepuram saree.

One of the basic requirements for claiming protection for traditional designs under industrial designs is the documentation of the tradition-based designs in conformity with the requirements of industrial designs, along with a classification of the designs. It is also important that the industrial property offices in different countries recognize such documents as a searchable database in the process of examination of applications for industrial design titles. The Government of India has undertaken such an exercise for medicinal plants in India—The Traditional Knowledge Digital Library is expected to be completed soon. A similar exercise for designs or natural dyes may also be considered. These are already well documented independently across institutes and organizations in the country.

**T**here also exist alternatives outside the conventional IPR laws for the protection of collective rights for works of art are often the product of collective efforts. Conventional IPR mechanisms have mostly been used for protection of individual or private rights. Collective rights organizations such as artist unions or performing rights societies provide for the recognition of the contribution of collective efforts. Neighbouring rights is a specific legal provision that recognizes the efforts of the several different contributors to a work of art or performance and guarantees certain rights to them. In France, these rights were introduced in 1985 to recognize the moral and remunerative rights of performing artists and the rights of record producers to authorize or forbid reproduction of the records.

The need for intellectual property protection of crafts arises in the context of (a) prevention of misappropriation or unauthorized use of tradi-

tional crafts and designs, (b) ensuring sharing of benefits on commercialization of the crafts and (c) for recognition of collective rights of the holders of expressions of folklore or crafts persons. As yet, no thought has gone into the two later issues: benefit distribution and customary rights. In a country where we are just becoming aware of acknowledging intellectual knowledge and rights over designs, little advance is expected on these matters. Here, however, we may cite the Australian experience as an example. The Australian courts have approached such claims with sensitivity to customary laws, traditions and practices of the indigenous communities in Australia. The court acknowledged cultural sensitivity and awarded exemplary damages for culturally based harm. To enable aboriginal clans to take account of collective ownership of the designs, damages awarded were lump sum. Additional damages were awarded for humiliation or insulting behaviour to a particular cultural group.

**I**n approaching the questions of creating additional value in crafts through technology improvement and sharing of benefits through IPR protection, there is utmost need for sensitivity to the position and requirements of each of the crafts sectors and the rights of craft persons. For technology intervention and laws for benefit sharing to be truly beneficial to the artisans and crafts persons, these have to be introduced by thinking for them and understanding their traditional and cultural contexts. Recognition of their contribution and their rights and a mechanism for actual distribution of benefits will go a long way in not only reaping the commercial potential of crafts but also in helping the craft persons to sustain their occupations and enjoy a position of prestige in today's globalized markets.

# Securing their future

L. C. JAIN

GLOBALISATION is today being hawked as a new idea. But in fact, over 70 years ago, the idea was advanced by Mahatma Gandhi as the 'Economic Constitution of the World':

'According to me the economic constitution of India, and for that matter of the world, should be such that no one under it should suffer from want of food and clothing. In other words, everybody should be able to get sufficient work to enable him to make two ends meet. And this ideal can be universally realized only if the means of production of the elementary necessities of life remain in the control of the masses.

'These should be freely available to all as God's air and water are or ought to be; they should not be made a vehicle for the exploitation of others. Their monopolization by any country, nation or group of persons would be unjust. The neglect of this simple principle is the cause of the destitution that we witness today not only in this unhappy land but elsewhere as well.'

The issue therefore is not 'globalisation' *per se*, but the character of globalisation, namely for whom the bell of globalisation tolls? As one can see there is a fundamental difference in Gandhiji's concept of the world economy and globalisation with that of the present day. The basic premise of Gandhi's economic constitution for the world was that its primary task was to ensure that no human being suffered from hunger and that the production system was so structured that the poor were enabled and empowered (ownership of means of production) to produce food locally for their own consumption as far as possible. This was to minimize their dependence on bringing in (imports) food into the local area. Local production of food was also to ensure employment to the largest number of people thus putting purchasing power in the hands of a larger number.

Gandhiji also saw the system of local production for food as the most effective insurance against hunger the

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world over. Next to food, he saw the production of cloth by the poor, locally, as a safeguard against their having to go naked.

In contrast, extant globalisation is based on a diametrically opposite view that all production, including food, cloth and other basic essential consumption items for human survival, should be produced only at such places in the world and in such production systems that offer 'comparative advantage' (ostensibly to reduce cost of production); and then such production, including food, be traded globally and transported across the world and taken to local villages by a network of traders.

This concept of globalisation is regarded as in the best interests of what is called 'global economy' which is not concerned explicitly and directly with an elementary fact of life that the 'need for food' arises thrice a day for every single stomach. It is a biological tyranny. Time is thus of the essence in ensuring immediate availability of food and its access. No other product faces such stringent condition of demand.

**S**econd, even in economic terms inherent limitations of the theory of 'comparative advantage' go unrecognized. It is confined to production/manufacturing. Production cost is only one constituent in the composition of the eventual price which the consumer has to pay. There are the distribution costs apart from enormous time lag when there is a vast distance between production and consumption points. There are the costs of storage, transportation and distribution up to the last stomach. These distribution costs often offset the supposed comparative advantage in terms of cost at the production point.

Besides, in this system of distant centres of production, purchasing

power remains concentrated and the poor are deprived of substantial share in the ensuing purchasing power. This gives rise to the obscene phenomenon of millions of tonnes of rotting grains side by side with starvation deaths. India has 60 million tonnes of food stocks while 50 million persons are acknowledged to be facing starvation – some even succumbing to it, and about 50 out of 100 children up to the age 0-5 suffering from malnutrition.

**F**or Gandhi, handicrafts was neither a 'category' nor a curiosity. They were an integral part of his economic thinking. His economic constitution of the world rested on food being produced locally by the bulk of the population dependent on land and agriculture. By its nature, agriculture is a seasonal activity. What does this vast humanity do locally for gainful employment during the slack season without having to give up means of local food production? It is here that the critical place of crafts enters the life of the rural population. Gandhi recognized why rural communities gave primacy to local production of cloth – khadi or handloom – the first based on hand spun yarn, the other on mill yarn. In his thinking, khadi based on local spinning received higher preference for it also yielded greater local employment and purchasing power. In his scheme of things, after the weaving of cloth, crafts followed, meeting other essential local needs – be it making of mats, baskets, earthenware, footwear or utensils. And all these were integral to freedom itself.

'Khadi is a controversial subject. Many people think that in advocating khadi, I am sailing against a headwind and am sure to sink the ship of swaraj and that I am taking the country to the dark ages. I do not propose to argue the case for khadi... it connotes the beginning of economic freedom and

equality of all in the country. It means a wholesale swadeshi mentality, a determination to find all the necessities of life in India and that too through the labour and intellect of the villagers. That means a reversal of the existing processes. This is to say that, instead of half a dozen cities of India and Great Britain living on the exploitation and the ruin of the 7,00,000 villages of India, the latter will be largely self-contained, and will voluntarily serve the cities of India and even the outside world in so far as it benefits both the parties. This needs a revolutionary change in the mentality and tastes of many.

'Khadi to me is the symbol of unity of Indian humanity, of its economic freedom and equality and, therefore, ultimately, in the poetic expression of Jawaharlal Nehru, "the livery of India's freedom".

'Moreover, khadi mentality means decentralization of the production and distribution of the necessities of life. Therefore, the formula so far evolved is, every village to produce all its necessities and a certain percentage in addition for the requirements of the cities.

'Heavy industries needs will be centralized and nationalised. But they will occupy the least part of the vast national activity which will mainly be in the villages.'

**H**is proposition was derived from his dream for free India: 'I have not pictured a poverty-stricken India containing ignorant millions. Establish village swaraj – make each village self-governing and self-contained as regards the essential needs of its inhabitants.' Fifty years after independence, there is not a single village out of 350,000 villages which is self-governing. Is it surprising we still have 300 million people who are poverty-stricken and as many who are ignorant



— deprived of literacy; and there are starvation deaths in villages alongside with bufferstocks of 60 million tonnes. Gandhiji had advocated food self-sufficiency at the village level as the primary task of village panchayats and had endorsed Vaikunthbhai Mehta's suggestion of a village level foodgrain bank to ensure that no single person goes hungry even for a day.

**S**waraj came. Gandhiji died less than six months after independence. Nehru became the steward of the Indian ship. He did not go for Gandhiji's political structure of people-led village republics to mind India's political, economic and social health on a day to day basis. Nor did he opt for the Gandhian vision of food and cloth led industrialisation which was oriented to subserve the villages.

As India's first prime minister, Nehru contended that 'the test of real strength is how much steel you produce, how much power you produce and use.' This contention was given lasting expression in the model of development formulated by P.C. Mahalanobis at Nehru's behest, its primary thrust being concentration of resources in sectors such as steel, power and the like to build industrial muscle and modern machines. This model was seen by its architects to be in perfect consonance with the chief aim of planning in India 'to solve the problem of unemployment as quickly as possible.' Indeed, Mahalanobis designed several cogent steps to achieve that consonance. Mahalanobis was to Nehru what Kumarappa was to Gandhiji.

It is not sufficiently recognised that while fashioning the foundations of the industrialisation model Mahalanobis raised the insightful question of the *character* of industrialisation which would be appropriate for India at its stage of development, and for its

immediate problems and long term agenda. He was aware that modern industrialisation and urbanisation are twins. But he argued that the pattern and pace of industrialisation in India must be so regulated as to prevent *premature urbanisation*.

He regarded unemployment as India's foremost problem and realised that pressures of mass unemployment, which was concentrated in rural areas, would exert enormous influence on the pace and pattern of urbanisation. Therefore, the first plank in his strategy of industrialisation was to reach work to the unemployed as close to where they lived, by creating the *widest possible dispersal* of 'work stations' right into the heart of rural India. Such an extensive network of work stations was to apply some breaks on intolerable influx of the unemployed to the existing relatively few urban industrial centres in the country at the time.

His operation plan included that scarce capital resources be concentrated to create a critical base for massive industrialisation, and labour resources be deployed for production of wage goods using minimal capital, for an attack on unemployment as quickly as possible.

**B**roadly, he strategised that existing industrial vocations (jobs/incomes) of the rural/urban populations must be protected and promoted as far as possible, and where necessary any existing competing machine mode of manufacture kept idle—but not human beings who must have work. Accordingly, any additional expansion of capacity for manufacture of consumer goods, he held, must as a rule be in the labour intensive segment of an industry/product and not in capital intensive techniques.

This strategy led to the setting up of the well known Karve Committee

and the common production programme industry by industry. While Mahalanobis was no Mahatma, it is noteworthy that the character he wanted to lend to industrialisation came closely to answer some of the adverse consequences of unbridled industrialisation which were of concern to the Mahatma.

**D**espite the fact that it was fully backed by Nehru, Mahalanobis' well thought out strategy came to naught. Nehru's own chosen team of ministers and officials made up the demolition squad. The common production programme was not adhered to by the Ministry of Industry and Commerce. It was breached by allowing huge capital investment in disallowed areas, e.g. in textile mills to produce cloth, which was assigned to be produced by the labour intensive handlooms under the Mahalanobis strategy.

For 17 uninterrupted years, Nehru remained at the helm as prime minister and chairman of the Planning Commission. But he could not protect the well-conceived Mahalanobis strategy from harm. As a consequence, unemployment and urbanisation galloped. The unemployed flocked to urban centres in search of work, in numbers beyond our industrial and urban capacity to digest, heaping misery on the most vulnerable sections of our societies.

Though Mahalanobis exited Yojana Bhavan and Nehru left us in 1964, unbridled industrialisation has continued as the ruling strategy, albeit with diminishing regard to mounting unemployment and premature urbanisation. Take numbers alone. In 40 years, between 1961 and 2001 (Third to Ninth Plan), there has been plan investment of about Rs 9000000 million on the infrastructure for industrialisation (energy, transport, communications, industry/minerals) and

not a fraction for labour and skill-based industries employing millions.

**T**he place and priority Mahalanobis gave to solving the employment problem 'quickly' by activating the labour intensive decentralised village industries was not only consistent with his economic model but also reflected his sensitivity to Vinoba Bhave's criticism of the First Plan at Yojana Bhavan where Vinoba arrived from his ashram covering 1200 km on foot: 'In the Constitution you have promised work and food to all citizens. But now you have totally forgotten this assurance. If you, on whose shoulders lies the responsibility of providing work to all, find it impossible to do so, you must resign.

'You ask village industries to support themselves. You first cut off my feet and want me to stand... Village industries did not die themselves, they have deliberately been killed.

'Although both the Planning Commission and I are primarily concerned with the good of the Indian people, there is a difference in our basic approach. I am concerned mainly with two matters. First, we should stick to our pledge of stopping import of food grains. The Commission visualises the continuance of imports for an indefinite period. I join issue on this point. We must fix a definite date for achieving self-sufficiency and abide by it. Otherwise, the will power of the nation shall die.

'Secondly, an essential postulate of planning should be to provide work for all. The Planning Commission accepts this objective, but refuses to shoulder the responsibility of implementing it. If we do not accept this responsibility, our planning would not be national but only partial. If they agree to provide work for all, our villages will have to be made self sufficient.'

Nehru's subsequent observations, however, raise a difficult question: Did Nehru subscribe fully to the Mahalanobis model, and were his reservations any the less responsible for the collapse of that model?

**I**n the standing committee of the NDC, great stress was laid on the heavy machine making industry which was seen as the basis of industrial growth. 'There is one approach which has sometimes been put forward that you should first build up your consumer goods industry, gradually save money and build up something else, thereby generating more employment. That, I believe, from the point of view of planning, is a completely discarded theory.

'Of course, it does some good here and there; I would not enter into the details but this approach is not a planned approach at all. If you want India to industrialise and to go ahead with odd little factories producing hair and the like—it is totally immaterial what things, whether they are small or big consumer articles. You must go to the root and base and build up the structure of industrial growth. Therefore, it is the heavy industries that count: nothing else counts, except as a balancing factor, which is, of course, important. We want planning for heavy machine making industries and heavy industries, we want industries that will make heavy machines and we should set about them as rapidly as possible because it takes time.'

Speaking at the All India Congress Committee, Chandigarh, 28 September 1959, Nehru argued that the primary thing about an integrated plan was production and not employment. Employment was important, but it was utterly unimportant in the context of production. It followed production and not preceded production.

And production would only go up by better techniques which meant modern methods. Nehru's formulation—that the primary thing was production and not employment—was destructive of the integral place of handlooms, village industry, crafts and the like. It also marked the end of the economic constitution of India as envisaged by Gandhiji.

This is the ground for us to suggest that we were bitten by the mentality of globalisation long before the recent crusade for globalisation and its passionate, albeit unthinking, advocacy in New Delhi since the unleashing of the new economic reforms early in the '90s.

**C**rafts to Gandhiji were not a decorative add on, they were a daily necessity. They arose and rested on fulfilling basic needs. This was indeed the rationale which lent strength and helped handicrafts survive various vicissitudes of the colonial period, summed up by D.R. Gadgil as the 'de-industrialisation' of India. But as shown above, soon after independence and long before 'globalisation' lashed at our shores, we had already torn apart handlooms, village industries and handicrafts from the very economic rationale of their existence to the toiling rural masses.

From the Third Five Year Plan onwards, this process of tearing apart of what were integrally interdependent, was set in motion. Soon it assumed menacing proportions as a systematic undoing of the initial formulation of the Mahatma and later Mahalanobis. Mahalanobis had in fact laid down that if and where necessary machines already installed could be kept idle, but not human beings. Notwithstanding such clarity and commitment, government allowed large machinery imports, as for example, in the textile sector, leading to what this

author described as 'handlooms face liquidation' in an article in the early '80s.

**T**his long journey is to remind ourselves that while considerable and commendable efforts have been made in the past five decades to promote 'development' of handlooms and handicrafts and these efforts have achieved notable progress, we must be cognizant of the reality that (a) we may have won some battles, but have lost the war, (b) handlooms and the crafts have not occupied the vast, universal and crucial role in the Indian economy that was envisaged for them at the time of freedom and reinforced by Mahalanobis, in terms of ensuring widespread employment and purchasing power thus diminishing rural poverty and disparities and, (c) even such place as they occupy today is by no means secure; their security and survival in the future cannot be taken for granted as stronger winds of globalisation blow and are in fact being invited by our authorities to blow in this land. In time to come the crafts will be shaken loose even further from their roots which lie in 'localization', i.e. in decentralized production for local consumption and deriving their main strength from the domestic consumers.

But we need not wait for disaster to strike. We can start on some fortifications when we still have time on our side. To initiate a discussion on what such steps could possibly be, here are some suggestions:

1. A movement to establish craft museums at every panchayat and municipal level by working closely with panchayat leaderships to reinforce local pride in local skills. These will be living museums. Each museum should build a directory of outstanding crafts persons of the area; Museums to organize two exhibitions per

year of local craft producers preferably to coincide with gram sabha meetings or Independence Day or Republic Day; To give awards to local crafts persons annually on Independence Day/Republic Day.

2. Panchayats/municipalities to be approached/assisted to strengthen local haats to promote interest and preference in the local population in local products.

3. To form crafts person's associations at 'area level' and 'by crafts' to protect their place and interest.

4. Upgradation of skills and quality of products, e.g. type of work Dastkar and other such organizations are doing, but this has to be multiplied a thousandfold.

5. Haats like Dilli Haat to be organized in all major towns with population of one million and above.

6. Annual crafts fair in India for exports of products of the kind we want to promote.

7. Stalls at all major railway stations and airports.

8. Education and housing for all craftspersons, and introduction of craft education in school curriculum.

9. For fostering daily visible aesthetics, to promote development of crafts linked with school/college education – dress, school bags, other equipment; and coordinated development with architects for use of crafts in public and private buildings and passenger buses.

All these may still be no more than a drop in the ocean, but without them even the drop will dry.

To conclude with an African parable – a favourite of Julius Nyerere: A rabbit was racing briskly. The people asked him, where was he heading to. The rabbit said, 'to fight the elephant.' His reply was met with derisive laughter. 'You are going to fight an elephant!' The rabbit said, 'Yes, I know, I can't fight the elephant, but I must give a fight.'

# New paths

JAYA JAITLEY

THE deeply entrenched caste system has been the one major factor responsible for the traditional skills of handicrafts and hand weaving. The history and the development or decline of various crafts is like a rich palimpsest in which the folk, the formal, the courtly and the tribal each have their own unique paths. Yet, these may have met, woven together, separated, transformed and flourished depending on the multitude of inputs that exist in a multi-layered society.

If we look at the craft scene in the rest of the world today, we see that in the former Soviet Union the pattern of state socialism practically decimated the common artisan. In the present milieu of Russia it is almost impossible to find the cobbler, the carpenter, the weaver, the potter of yore. In Japan there is still a strong conservative and cultural streak running through the veins of its people. Thus their best craftsmen are termed national treasures, and sections of their traditional crafts have protection for the sake of preservation. However, some, like the bamboo crafts sold in Japanese shops, are now more likely to have been made in factories in China.

The craft manufacture of China is now carried out under fairly well organized workshop conditions run by private entrepreneurs. Mechanized

processes often replace tedious replication of handwork and the various components are put together by workers who are not traditional craftspeople as we define them in India. China has provided considerable mechanized inputs into its ceramics, bamboo, carpets and embroidered silk items but they sell as crafts and do provide employment to a large number of people who work in shifts in factories.

South Korea manufactures 'Asian' crafts that can be found in any Chinatown bazaar. Thailand has tuned its crafts to a high degree of excellence mainly for tourists. These are made in rural areas but are not necessarily a part of the everyday lives of the rural people who have taken to synthetics and other expressions of modernity for their own use. Many products like silk, basketry, silverware, lacquer and papier machie work are therefore showcased and packaged to demonstrate the cultural output of Thailand to outsiders. The textiles are still holding out as garments worn by various communities in rural areas but these are converted into contemporary products like home furnishings and modern fashion wear for city markets. The Philippines has baskets, brooms and fans for the common folk, while the lacquer work of Burma has lost its elegance under military rule.

South American countries have retained their crafts where ever peasant societies are still a large part of the population. Roadside marketplaces reflect the vibrancy of the textiles and pottery produces by artisans in these areas. In countries in Africa, there are vast differences in the availability and development of crafts. For instance, Zimbabwe has roadside markets as well as a developed range of quality products for the tourist community. South Africa is still searching for ways and means to give an impetus to its craft sector for the sake of employment. Many other African countries are suffering in the throes of drought, conflict and modernization and do not have the required stability to develop what is still largely viewed as a soft sector.

**I**n Europe and other western countries crafts flourished when they were still peasant dominated societies. But with industrialization the impetus for development came from the mills of Lancaster rather than from the looms of Bengal and from conglomerates rather than communities. Standardization and mechanization not only dictated the pattern of supply and demand but also swamped the markets of those societies that neither could, nor would, nor even should adopt the very same pattern of growth.

Highly industrialized countries like Japan, Sweden, the USA and Australia have replaced their traditional craftsperson with the practitioners of studio crafts, which are highly individualistic and generally *avant garde* and decorative in nature. Those who were blacksmiths or potters or carpenters are now elevated to the designer category, creating undeniably attractive work called one-off pieces, generally very expensive and almost always through exhibition-like displays. A few small oases of common

people's crafts in some of these countries are worth mentioning because they demonstrate the artistic spirit of those inclined towards crafts as part of a community activity.

Crafts marketplaces in some of these countries are lively spots: earthy, friendly and colourful. In Melbourne, Australia there is a lively and large crafts market called the Cat's Tango Market, which is allowed to spread itself in the piazza courtesy a clutch of high-rise corporate offices that do not mind promoting crafts on Sundays. Craftspeople from suburban and rural areas come with their children and packed lunches, musicians entertain, clowns and magicians perform and a good time is had by all. Ceramics, paintings, glasswork, dried flowers, costume jewellery and hundreds of knick-knacks of various types are fashioned and sold to delighted citizens of Melbourne and a smattering of tourists. Most of the participants are there for the sheer joy of creativity and salesmanship and the fun of engaging in such a lively venture.

**C**rafts markets in Boston and London's Covent Garden offer stalls to many local craftspeople, providing a welcome break from standardized products and brand names that are larger than life. Custom-made buttons, glass ware, hand-knitted garments, pottery and leather picture frames have the special individual look that make crafts special in a homogenized world. All these craft spaces are, of course, not part of any central economic planning or economic need. They are merely well organized, fun places where the artistic urges can be fulfilled in an otherwise highly mechanized society. Even in areas where local arts are indigenous, ethnic products as is the aboriginal art of Australia, are not found so much in the inexpensive marketplaces

where goods for everyday living are picked up, but elegantly showcased by 'white people' in art galleries and boutiques.

Indian craftsmanship has been a way of life for centuries. In each era most crafts have survived by going under the radar and carrying on for the local population, unnoticed, or by suitably adapting to the times. The craft trade was globalized long back through the Spice Route, the Silk Route, and during such periods as when France fell under the spell of the Kashmiri shawl. Region-specific crafts such as woven and printed textiles, embroideries, damascene work and jewellery have gone to all parts of the world through enterprising traders and courtly interventions.

**F**or far too long we have held seminars on the credit, marketing and raw material needs of craftspeople, mouthed the same words and looked for all the solutions from within the ubiquitous *mai-baap*, the government. In a democratic socialist pattern of policy-making in independent India's formative years, this was perfectly understandable. But it took a while for people to realize that government support within what was actually a capitalist environment meant that any commercial activity run by government institutions was largely inefficient.

Indian craftspeople depended entirely on government during this phase and despite red tape and straightjacket policies they received some of the oxygen required to resuscitate them and find openings through central and state emporia to demonstrate their continued existence. However, the basic needs of many remained unfulfilled and they still depended on a variety of intermediaries.

The 'Gurjari' experience of the eighties was an important one. As a

person closely involved I can say through hands-on knowledge that the determined effort of this organization owned by the Government of Gujarat to fulfil its social purpose distinguished it from the others. Instead of just buying whatever was made in the bazaar, or was being sold under distress conditions from drought stricken rural areas, the Gujarat State Handicrafts and Handlooms Development Corporation made it a point to address the potential and problems of each craftsman and community individually.

**I**t was an unwritten rule that no person would be turned back because his or her wares were not good enough or were not selling. It was the duty of the sales persons, designers, shop managers and myself as the design and marketing consultant to see that each product was improved and made saleable. A systematic method of ordering goods, clearance of accumulated stock, exciting sales promotion ideas, customer feedback, sales incentives for the staff, were all brought into the management of handicraft sales. This was before the days of management jargon and marketing gurus.

For the first time, a methodology for selling crafts commercially with high turnovers, exports and profits was inculcated into a government organization transforming it from a stagnant and dust-ridden place into a leader of fashion and lifestyles much before the glossy pages took over these phrases. In those days Gurjari became the buzzword for college fashion and people began to 'think ethnic' in home décor thanks to the variety of furnishing fabrics, furniture and decorative items that were developed. Since so many customers came into the shop asking, 'what's new at Gurjari?' we began a series of exhibitions every time new products or designs were

introduced. Many new branches opened, sales figures went up appreciatively and many other lifeless emporia realized they had an act to follow.

Unfortunately, most of these normally lethargic organizations were manned with people who looked at craft-related jobs as a punishment posting. Most thought it was much easier to allocate sections of the shop to different private parties who would be responsible for sales and required to hand over thirty per cent of the sales to the state host. This could never ensure that the artisan was getting the right wage. Many managers thought that if Gujarati tie-dyed fabrics or Orissa silver filigree work was selling well it was fine to sell these in the Himachal Pradesh or Bihar shop. The identification of a particular state with its crafts and the integrated cultural ambience of the state soon blurred and most of the state emporia in the 21st century became sellers of second grade products within a stultified government milieu.

**T**his was not a singular disaster. Over the years many 'entrepreneurs' had started their own boutiques and new design efforts with the material found in the emporia and created a range of innovative ideas on their own. Government had been able to demonstrate the value and potential for these products, and if it was time for these bodies to wither away into secondary place, so be it – as long as the artisan had received recognition, confidence, and a whole new clientele. The interest in crafts shown by the private sector grew at this point of time and the proliferation of boutiques improved the product, presentation and designs. Once artisans had a quality input and better returns, the product created by the community improved because of competition.

The arrival of the dreaded globalization in 1992, despite many political parties, trade unions and organizations opposing it, had many genuinely worried. Indian markets would once again be flooded by cheap foreign stuff. We would not be able to compete fairly since craftspeople were illiterate and poor. The middlemen and big fish alone would savour the fruits of global marketing. Handloom weavers would be further impoverished once the protective quotas were phased out.

**T**hese were some of the arguments voiced by those who were genuinely concerned about craftspeople and the future of Indian crafts. We had voiced concerns and raised problems which the government was expected to solve without remembering that crafts had flourished at various times without government intervention and at times had declined through government neglect or by design, as when India was under colonial rule. Even in this period if only an entrepreneur could sniff an opportunity and craftspeople deliver, craft skills could survive and improve.

Characteristics that were seen as weaknesses in the craft sector, such as lack of standardization, the inability to provide large quantities of any one given item, inexpensive and sometimes earthy packaging methods, suddenly began to appear as areas of strength in a world where everything else was standard and synthetic. For along with globalization came the growing awareness of eco-friendly lifestyles, organic products and vegetable dye fabrics, the incredible potential of embroideries and jute-ware, and the use of silk floss, banana fibre and other such exotic materials to produce handmade paper.

The reinvention, repackaging and rebirth of *ahimsa* products like

khadi, which has a special appeal in a world resounding with nuclear tests and terrorism, offer fresh opportunities to India to provide handmade products from a vast resource base that exists nowhere else in the world. Khadi and village industries are often left out of the discourse held with craftspeople. Recently this resource has been upgraded, showcased in a new manner and made contemporary. Ideologically, ecologically and for the sustenance of livelihoods, agarbatti, soap, khadi ready-mades, honey and handmade paper can and should flood local and export markets if people with commitment handle the project. These are items not easily available anywhere in the world in the variety and range that we can offer from India.

**G**overnment is slowly but surely identifying areas in which it can infuse the kind of inputs that are impossible to handle by private entrepreneurs or craftspeople such as generic protection of certain crafts and textiles through appropriate legislation. Bagru and Sanganer prints, Kanchipuram saris, Kolhapuri chappals, dhokra metalware, Warli and Mithila painting, all these and more urgently need generic patenting so that imitation by interlopers from other areas and sectors is discouraged. Legislative measures are the furthest from the mind of craftspeople but when they hear about these possibilities they react very positively.

Government also has to learn to readjust its funds so that basic needs in the area of infrastructure are provided. Marketing must be made easier for artisans, private bodies, non-governmental development organizations and associations of manufactures in the larger sectors such as carpets and brassware. Of course, all this is to be seen in the context of the larger picture of globalization in which the smart and

the sturdy survive while many thousands remain, as usual, below the radar until someone finds them and infuses them with badly needed support.

Somewhere along the way, it has become necessary to stop bewailing the fate of unorganized artisans who have no voice or effective lobbies in the way that big industry have, and assess their strengths instead. Equally underestimated is the ability of some of the enlightened craftspeople to seize the new opportunities of global interaction to widen their own knowledge, technologies and abilities. Initially e-commerce seemed like something that would forever remain alien to the artisan, but he soon realized that he could obtain an e-mail address and communicate with clients anywhere in the world without having to step out, catch a bus and travel to the nearest post office.

**T**here are artisans in Andhra Pradesh, Rajasthan and Gujarat, and probably elsewhere too, who have registered domain names. An artisan family in the earthquake-hit areas of Kutch in Gujarat has plans to e-mail its samples of printed cloth to clients, museums and researchers. It was only a mere 20 years ago that they got an electric connection to their home and were able to construct a toilet for visitors who could not be asked to go and squat in the nearby fields. In the midst of all the rubble of the earthquake of early 2001, they were more concerned about getting on with their work with a visiting client than rebuilding their home. Today they are reconstructing their lives with plans to erect an effluent treatment plant, workshops, a school, a shop, a community centre and a plantation of indigo for vegetable dyes for two hundred families.

Minor sustenance, basic supplies of electricity and water and pipelines for the water supply will bring

about a township far better than what they had before the earthquake. This will help the preservation, survival and development of the most beautiful hand-printed fabrics made in the world. This kind of enterprise does not fit in with the standard patronizing poster picture of the traditional artisan in his mud hut, painting with a twig, or weaving with sweat falling off his brow. Perhaps it is the beholder who has to readjust his sights to the change that takes place when a craftsperson is given the dignity and the markets that he deserves.

**M**any skilled craftspeople now have exhibitions at prestigious art galleries and at the India Habitat Centre in New Delhi, rubbing shoulders with contemporary and studio artists. When a few learn the ropes the entire community shares the knowledge and the work is elevated in the eyes of the public. Craftspeople need no longer listen to patronizing promoters who feel they can be best showcased in the old mud hut for a rural ambience but care has to be taken not to distance them from the mass of people in the interest of serving only elitist tastes.

Dilli Haat, the market place that came up in New Delhi in the mid-90s, was an attempt by this writer to do many things at once. It drew from the traditional *haat* system of India's shanty marketplaces and upgraded it within an urban environment. It had to be simple, unpretentious, integrated, and comfortable for the artisan who came from the village as producer and salesman, and to learn about the needs of the urban customer. The strength of variety was embodied in the policy of rotating craftspeople every fortnight so that a sprawling complex of landscaping, cafes for regional food, entertainment areas and two hundred stalls could be used by thousands of craftspeople over the years.



Crafts have been revived through access to such a central market space and craftspeople have become more confident of their products and prices. The popularity and high demand for shops in Dilli Haat has created the usual problem of fraudulent means being used to retain shop spaces longer than the regulated time. Traders impersonate craftspeople, but with the government deciding to invest a fair amount of funds in replicating the concept in 20 states of the country, and the Delhi Government alone planning to have four more variations in the capital, hopefully there will be more craft and less craftiness by artisans and better evolved management practices by the government bodies that administer the marketplace.

**M**eaningful interventions in the development of the bamboo sector should help India to compete with China if we are willing to accept that some mechanization of tedious hand processes is inevitable. Before that, cultivators need to be aware of better practices in nurturing healthy bamboo and entrepreneurs need to think about providing the necessary fillip to cottage producers to work in well organized factory conditions. Moradabad brass that had dulled with stagnation has transformed itself into contemporary silver, pewter and lacquer look-alikes, which the *Economic Times* described as 'a slow takeover of Art Britannica by Galleria Indica.' For the first time in recent memory this same newspaper devoted an entire page to the marketing strength of handicrafts and the vast potential that is being tapped in this sector. In the era of globalization this is no mean achievement for millions of craftspeople who still craft their products under primitive conditions with no knowledge of what lies beyond their district borders.

Finally, craft is not just about marketing and economics although without these there would be no craftspeople left. It is also about the essence of India's culture and the creative vocabulary of its perpetrators. For a craftsperson, his self-respect, recognition and dignity are as important as the quality of his daily bread. For some decades a few select craftspeople have been commissioned to make one-off pieces for prestigious shows or locations but a museum piece does not satisfy the urges of a community.

**I**t is in this context that we recently tapped the skills of community artists from tribal groups in Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra and Gujarat, bard painters from West Bengal, a papier mache artist from Kashmir, a patachitra painter from Orissa and a phad painter from Rajasthan to experiment with preparing illustrations for children's stories for the National Book Trust. The response from both sides was unexpectedly enthusiastic. Not only were their own interpretations of the stories richer and more attractive than the usual fare, but the joy of the artists for having been part of a project that took them into the world of literature, children's awareness and printed works with their name beside that of the author of the story, was something that, as one artist said, had been his dream for 20 years. New ways of garnering pride, talent and communication skills through projects of this nature will not just provide new avenues of resource for folk artists but give them an elevated status.

Today the crafts person is a far more equal partner in his own development. With a vast design dictionary, an ocean of skills and cultural traditions that need to be sustained for his own livelihood and for India's economic well-being, many agencies, both private and public have exciting new paths to tread.



# Census

## Handicraft artisans 1995-96

H. R. AMETA

HANDICRAFT is our national heritage and despite its substantial contribution to the Indian economy in terms of employment and income, there is near total lack of information on the artisans. Policy-makers lack data for suitable planning, as even the size of the artisan population is not available. The handicraft sector is under the Ministry of Textiles, GOI and artisan development is one of its thrust areas. The Office of the Development Commissioner (Handicrafts) implements a number of development schemes ranging from skill formation and improvement of production techniques to marketing at home and abroad. However, the impact of such schemes is not substantial and one important reason is the lack of proper information about the target group. In view of this, the Office of the Development Commissioner (H) planned to conduct an All India Census of Handicraft Artisans in 1993.

Since census enumeration of handicraft artisans is a huge task involving several agencies for fieldwork, a need for clear-cut definition of handicraft artisans, type of craft activities and the concentration of handicraft pockets was felt necessary. This task was given to the National Council of Applied Economic Research, New Delhi in 1993.

In the absence of any readily available past estimates which could serve as a basis for updating, the Council decided to collect the necessary primary information from different states. Though handicrafts are a state subject forming a part of rural industries, most governments could not furnish any proper database on craftsmen, as the states focus more on the marketing side rather than production. On the other hand, several nodal agencies set up by the Office of the Development Commissioner (Handicrafts) in the form of marketing and extension service centres across the country were found to be fairly well acquainted with the state of handicraft activity in their areas of jurisdiction. These centres were, therefore, contacted for collection of primary information on crafts practised, areas of craft concentration, and an idea of craft persons in each craft. The NCAER submitted its report

'Census of Handicraft Artisans - Phase I' to the Office of the Development Commissioner (Handicrafts) in June 1993.

State-wise estimates of artisan population served as a basis for allocation of enumeration work to different government and non-government organizations. The Office of the Development Commissioner (Handicrafts) selected 15 organizations, in consultation with NCAER for the survey.

NCAER prepared a well-structured questionnaire in consultation with the office of the DC (H) and shortlisted officials were imparted extensive training. The questionnaire was printed in local language of the state by the concerned field agency. Since the codes were developed in advance and questionnaires canvassed in different languages, no problem was encountered during state-wise analysis and later, compilation of data at all India level.

NCAER brought out reports of census of handicraft artisans separately for each state (26 including Delhi) and for each union territory (6 union territories). While volume 1 to 26 contain state-wise handicraft census data at district level, volume 27 presents the census data for each union territory separately. An all India summary was also prepared giving state-wise data and all India averages and totals. The following table presents the population of handicraft artisans by sectors of production across the states.

While NCAER estimated 48.2 lakh handicraft artisans in its pre-census report, the final census results at 47.6 lakh almost tallies at the all India level. However, there is a difference across the states. For Gujarat, Karnataka and Maharashtra the census figures were much lower than earlier estimates in a pre-census survey. Despite sufficient care to ensure the reliability of data, normal reporting errors cannot altogether be eliminated. A few limitations of the census work were.

\* This is not a census enumeration in a true sense. Each and every household of all villages and urban localities was not visited. Only craft concentration pockets (CCPs) were visited by the enumeration team. Further,

all households in a CCP were not canvassed to confirm the artisan population.

\* The unorganized nature of craft activity coupled with its wide dispersal throughout the length and breadth of the country posed a challenge to the task of enumeration. As such, craft persons not fairly known by their craft activity are not covered.

\* Artisans engaged in crafts such as gold jewellery with and without precious metal are not covered as the supply of data on value of production, sale, etc. was doubtful.

\* All artisans engaged in the production of agarbattis are not covered in the present census. Only a few, whose activity is distinctly handicraft, are covered in the survey. Most of the agarbatti producing units were not contacted, as in the case of Mysore where agarbatti is considered a cottage industry.

\* Artisans engaged in stone dressing and crushing craft are not covered.

\* Artisans engaged in manufacturing of coconut leaf products are also not covered.

\* Many of the workers trained in handicraft activity by the government agencies or any other voluntary organizations have not actually started the work. As such trained handicraft artisans not practicing the handicraft activity are omitted from the purview of census enumeration.

The fieldwork for census of handicraft artisans was carried out during 1995-96, except in Jammu and Kashmir, Punjab and the union territory of Chandigarh where the activity was carried out during 1999-2000.

Handicraft activity is predominantly in the unorganised household sector. It accounts for 98%

State-wise Number of Handicraft Units and Artisans in Household and non-Household Sectors in 1995-96.  
(figures in number)

State/Union Territory	Handicraft Units by Sector			Handicraft Artisans by Sector		
	HH	Non-HH	Total	HH	Non-HH	Total
Andhra Pradesh	76162	121	76283	120457	1423	121880
Arunachal Pradesh	4011	33	4044	15539	196	15735
Assam	29816	544	30360	97363	3119	100482
Bihar	70485	48	70533	212591	524	213115
Delhi	11140	5881	17021	28875	16029	44904
Goa	465	107	572	953	169	1122
Gujarat	32199	498	32697	126289	15681	141970
Haryana	13845	2377	16222	67595	50338	117933
Himachal Pradesh	25456	602	26058	44614	4401	49015
Jammu & Kashmir	132789	1143	133932	524351	17768	542119
Karnataka	12330	53	12383	21388	391	21779
Kerala	7191	204	7395	13071	2187	15258
Madhya Pradesh	21804	150	21954	49880	1243	51123
Maharashtra	42541	9908	52449	93816	19000	112816
Manipur	97606	445	98051	378123	1865	739988
Meghalaya	11360	152	11512	52774	790	53564
Mizoram	2185	28	2213	5127	133	5260
Nagaland	17484	119	17603	79285	593	79878
Orissa	25598	370	25968	65974	3382	69356
Punjab	53700	57	53757	101425	482	101907
Rajasthan	126690	2181	128871	399622	8078	407700
Sikkim	2169	29	2198	9605	163	9768
Tamil Nadu	30310	1436	31746	117894	7448	125342
Tripura	77266	109	77375	243726	769	244495
Uttar Pradesh	282040	1764	283804	1159668	16861	1176529
West Bengal	217648	1049	218697	551003	3278	554281
Andaman & Nicobar	374	121	495	740	350	1090
Chandigarh	163	5	168	396	34	430
Dadra & Nagar Haveli	101	0	101	111	-	111
Daman & Diu	218	0	218	278	-	278
Lakshadweep	21	3	24	43	83	126
Pondicherry	247	105	352	986	846	1832
All India	1425414	29642	1455056	4583562	177624	4761186

of units and 96.3% artisans. Artisans in the household sector are mostly household members practicing handicraft activity jointly at their residence, who, if need arises, employ other artisans for work. Hardly 3.2% household units hire other artisans accounting for 3.1% of the total work force (artisans) in the household sector. While the earlier table shows the distribution of handicraft units and artisans by sector across the states, following table indicates the sector-wise per cent share at all India level.

<b>Distribution of Handicraft Units and Artisans by Sector</b> (per cent)		
<i>Handicraft Sector</i>	<i># of Units</i>	<i># of Artisans</i>
Household Sector	97.96	96.27
Non-household Sector	2.04	3.73
All India Total	100.00 (1455056)	100.00 (4761186)

Note: Figures in parenthesis are absolute numbers

Handicraft artisans are spread throughout the country. The rural segment accounts for 78.2% units and 76.5% artisans. The proportion of household sector is much higher in rural areas compared to the non-household sector. The following table shows the magnitude of handicraft units and artisans by location.

<b>Total Number of Handicraft Units and Artisans by Location</b>		
<i>Location of Handicraft Unit</i>	<i># of Units</i>	<i># of Artisans</i>
Rural Areas	1137580 (78.2%)	3640582 (76.5%)
Urban Areas	317476 (21.8%)	1120604 (23.5%)
All India Total	1455056	4761186

Textiles, including yarns of cotton, woollen, jute and mesta is the most widely used medium of craft across the country. More than 58% of the artisans earn their livelihood either fully or partially through this medium. Females in almost every household practice embroidery work by hand, though commercial participation of the activity is limited. However, it accounts for 23.80% of artisans in the textile medium followed by artisans engaged in manufacture of woollen and silk carpets by hand at 18.52%. Among other medium of crafts, cane and bamboo accounts for 12.49% of total handicraft artisans followed by 6.40% using straw, grass, fibre and leaf. Clay and ceramics and wood account for 5.50 and 5.48% artisans respectively.

The following table gives the per cent share of handicraft units and artisans using different medium of craft across the country.

<b>Distribution of Handicraft Units and Artisans by Craft Medium (per cent)</b>		
<i>Medium of Craft (major craft)</i>	<i># of Units</i>	<i># of Artisans</i>
Textiles		
Carpets	8.78	10.82
Other floor coverings	3.62	4.38
Other textiles	44.30	43.22
All Textiles	56.70	58.42
Cane and bamboo	12.63	12.49
Wood	6.19	5.48
Metal	3.62	3.68
Stone	0.80	0.71
Straw, grass, fibre and leaf	7.40	6.40
Leather	2.79	2.85
Glass	0.83	1.03
Clay and ceramics	5.16	5.50
Ivory, bone, horn and shells	0.61	0.60
Miscellaneous	3.27	2.84
All mediums (all major crafts)	100.00 (1455056)	100.00 (4761186)

Note: Figures in parenthesis are absolute numbers

The distribution of handicraft artisans by religion is: Hindu 70%, Muslim 23%, Sikh 2%, Christian 4%, and Others 1%.

Handicraft artisans classified by social group are: Scheduled castes 23%, Scheduled tribes 11%, Other backward castes 30%, and Others 36%.

<b>Handicraft Artisans in India Classified by Sex and Age Group (per cent)</b>			
<i>Age group in years</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>Total</i>
Upto 14	10.03	11.13	10.55
15-25	34.23	35.92	35.03
26-40	33.90	33.92	33.91
41-60	19.06	17.12	18.14
Above 60	2.78	1.91	2.37
All age groups	100.00 (2503905)	100.00 (2257281)	100.00 (4761186)

Note: Figures in parenthesis are absolute numbers

#### **Incidence of Child Labour in Major Craft Activities in India** (Artisans under 15 years as % of total # of artisans) (per cent)

<i>Medium of Craft (major craft)</i>	<i>Segment</i>		
	<i>Family</i>	<i>Hired</i>	<i>Both</i>
Textiles			
Carpets	6.9	0.9	7.8
Other floor coverings	8.7	0.7	9.5
Other textiles	10.4	0.4	10.7
All Textiles	9.6	0.5	10.0
Cane and bamboo	9.5	-	9.5
Wood	8.8	0.4	9.2
Metal	10.4	0.3	10.7
Stone	9.8	0.4	10.2
Straw, grass, fibre and leaf	11.3	-	11.3
Leather	12.8	0.2	13.0
Glass	14.0	0.8	14.8
Clay and ceramics	15.3	0.2	15.5
Ivory, bone, horn and shells	9.0	0.1	9.1
Miscellaneous	12.5	0.2	12.7
All mediums (all major crafts)	10.2	0.4	10.6

# Books

OF the clutch of books on craft that I received for review, five of the nine books were published by the Publications Division, a GOI venture set up to publish books on subjects which, even if not of commercial interest, represent important areas of research as part of our cultural tradition. Two books are by a local publishing house and two other are from the Victoria and Albert Museum.

A quick look at the books produced by the government confirms the pedestrian quality of the publications. Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay had written a large number of books on crafts which had a relevance in the '60s when hardly any book on the current situation of crafts was available. *India's Craft Tradition* is, however, a rehash and abbreviated version of her other books, totally inappropriate in today's context when so many in-depth publications are available.

Jamila Brijbhushan's *Indian Embroidery*, published in 1980, is so full of errors that one is amazed. Kinnar is translated as half fish, half elephant! Beadwork of Kathiawar is described as using transparent and semi-transparent beads, inaccurate since the beads are opaque. The Baluchari sari is called embroidered sari. A typical Kutchi child's kedia and salwar is passed off as phulkari work of Punjab/Haryana. Jamila Brijbhushan has a number of books on crafts listed against her name. We used to call them cut, snip and paste job from the *Journal of Indian Art* (an excellent

publication of the colonial period) as well as the gazetteers, which provided the material for her, painstakingly gone through and reproduced (even with their errors) without any attempt to carry out fresh research. Here Jamila has tried to keep up with the new research by reproducing a Ganeshia, an embroidery from Saurashtra of ritual importance on the cover, but instead, mistakenly refers to it as Gujarat embroidery.

In comparison, Meera Mukherji's *Folk Metal Craft of Eastern India* contains useful material. It is a work by a practising artist, who researched the traditional lost wax process of casting and later used it for making her own sculptures. Her recording of the regional differences in techniques, the drawings of the tools and equipment, the illustration of all the processes, provide not only an excellent record of our intangible heritage, which is part of the oral tradition, but will serve as a guide to practising craftsmen, unfortunately now taking short cuts in the production, little realizing that in the process they are losing out on the fine quality of workmanship. By the time they might try to recapture the old finish, they would have lost the knowledge, but for this kind of a detailed study. Fortunately, current researchers have further developed this methodology in their research and improved versions of such documentation should be on the government's publication agenda.

H. Bhisham Pal's book, *Handicrafts of Rajasthan*, another offering by the Publications Division is typical of work by an amateur! In the early stage of handicrafts development anyone and everyone could advise on handicrafts. In fact, most officials and their wives posted in the provinces imagined themselves as designers and later, writers. It is distressing that so many of the writers on crafts who produce coffee table books even today, neither carry out any research in the field nor study previous publications such as gazetteers, monographs and census reports before they venture into print. A number of dilettantes have taken to immortalizing themselves by writing on handicrafts and government departments are publishing them without even proper editing.

*Painted Folklore and Folklore Painters of India* by its very title warns readers that they are in for a rather ponderous journey. They might find a few nuggets of information after plodding through a fair amount of irrelevant, badly written text. A few examples are indicative of the rather obscure manner of expression

*Living Dolls: Story of Indian Puppet* by Jiwan Pani. Publications Division, Government of India, 1986.

*India's Craft Tradition* by Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay. Publications Division, Government of India.

*Indian Embroidery* by Jamila Brijbhushan. Publications Division, Government of India, 1980.

*Handicrafts of Rajasthan* by H. Bhisham Pal. Publications Division, Government of India, 1984.

*Folk Metal Craft of Eastern India* by Meera Mukherji. All India Handicrafts Board, New Delhi.

*Vishvakarma's Children - Stories of India's Craftspeople* by Jaya Jaitley. Institute of Social Sciences and Concept Publishing Company, New Delhi, 2001.

*Painted Folklore and Folklore Painters of India* by O.P. Joshi. Concept Publishing Company, Delhi, 1976.

*Indian Ikat Textiles* by Rosemary Crill. Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

*Shamiana: The Mughal Tent. A catalogue of a project.* Developed and coordinated by Shiren Akbar. Victoria and Albert Museum, London, 1999.

or lack of it. 'The study of visual and narrative art together is a difficult phenomenon to analyze.' 'The western social scientists have elaborately dealt with the methodology for studying narrative folklore, but no unified method for organising the study of narrated folklore and painted folklore has been evolved.' It is amazing that such writing can be published. The only saving grace is that the book narrates the episode of the panels of the painted scrolls in one section and provides the family history of some of the painters of the Nathdwara Pechwai.

It is unfair to take up such a limited range of publications for a review of the literature available on crafts. Excellent research on similar themes have been published by Haku Shah and Jyotindra Jain, many of them government publications. The book by Jyotindra Jain, *Painted Myths and Creation* published by the Lalit Kala Academy on the Pithoda reflects erudite scholarship and is beautifully illustrated.

Amongst the books produced in India and made available to me perhaps the only one that deserves to be taken seriously is Jaya Jaitly's *Vishvakarma's Children*. It provides a glimpse into the everydayness of some of the craftspersons and the drudgery of their life. The downside is the continuous grey in narration, whether it's the story of the weavers of Fatehpur Sikri or the dhokra metal workers of Jhigdi who make jewellery for the tribal people. The craftspersons rarely come across as creative people, with a multifaceted personality. True, life is hard, but it is so for everyone and yet there are moments of joy, of creativity, of celebration associated with the rites of passage, with the diurnal rhythms. These are often celebrated with greater vitality and generosity by the craftspersons. In the *Catalogue of Master Weavers*, Rta Kapur's interviews with the craftsmen were indicative of the richness of their traditions, which sparkled through despite the fact that the many tribulations faced by the craft community were not ignored.

This random selection is not properly representative of the publications that have come out on the arts and crafts of India in the last 30 years starting from the period when research by Indian writers first began to be published. There is no book here by the younger group of Indian writers on crafts who began to write after the veterans, such as Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, Pupul Jayakar, Kamala Dongerberry and others. Where is the work of Jyotindra Jain, Haku Shah, Amba Sanyal, Rta Kapur Chishti, Aman Nath, Aarti Agarwal, Lotika Varadarajan, Kalyan Krishna, Aditi Shirali and Ranjan, and many other Indian scholars? What about the pub-

lication by masters such as Ganapathi Sthapathy and other practitioners of crafts traditions?

In contrast to the books discussed earlier, there are two publications in the collection brought out by the Victoria and Albert Museum, London. The Museum has an excellent collection of Indian arts and crafts. The curators of the collection are well-known scholars and researchers who travelled to the traditional centres to carry out research. The two books though are different in their purpose. *Indian Ikat Textile* by Rosemary Crill is an in-depth study of the technique and the range of traditions throughout India. *Shamiana: The Mughal Tent* is a catalogue concerned with immigrant women from the subcontinent. The women were brought together to create a space, Shamiana, a marquee, using their imagination, their skills and community spirit. This project managed to bring these women together and break their isolation. It achieved, through a single person's vision and effort, what the many government social welfare organisations could not manage over many decades! Though both the publications are produced by a government agency, they are well researched, well written and excellently produced.

What do we expect in the publications that are coming out today? The books on crafts are many. There are the numerous coffee table books being brought out for the eager affluent consumer. There are catalogues for exhibition, often excellent as they are focused on a particular theme and on objects, which can be seen. There are a number of publications for the researcher and for academics, but generally they are of uneven quality. But there are rarely any books for the craftsperson, for those working in the field and for the designers.

What we need are perhaps more technical publications. There are outstanding research projects being done by students as a part of their diploma projects, by masters students of textiles, home science, as well as diploma projects by professional students of design institutes, NIFT, and even in schools of architecture which gather dust in the academic libraries, are eaten by white ants and thrown out after a few years. These need to be published.

As a member of the jury for a number of such projects, I have come across first rate work by students, some of it better than the research by specialists. With good editing and a selection of illustrations, these could be published adding to our knowledge, besides providing a useful record of our intangible national heritage which may otherwise be lost. It is these publications which should be brought out or sponsored by the government publishing houses.

A large number of seminars are held by NGOs, educational institutions and the government. A selection of well prepared papers could also be produced through this initiative. Institutions such as NIFT bring out very plush publications, which are not only rarely seen at bookshops, but are uneven in quality and invariably too expensive. These should be discouraged and more appropriate publications that would be useful for the students, the practitioners and trade brought out.

We need small well produced publications that would disseminate knowledge on the craft traditions and create an awareness among the consumers of the range of products, the intricacy of the craft, its technique, significance and so on. What to look for when buying for the trousseau, for the home or as a thoughtful gift for a special occasion. These would help hone not only consumer appreciation, but also develop their aesthetics so that they become discerning buyers and help raise standards.

We need to promote books written by the craftspeople, as well as those which could be written jointly by the researcher and practitioner. We, in the crafts field—researchers, organisers, part of NGO networks—seem to pay little attention to the needs of educational and promotional material. This is an important area that has never been examined objectively and what better, if they are produced with the practitioners. Finally, we need books for our craftspeople to look at, to browse through, to admire, to learn from and appreciate the subtlety of the craft expressions of other traditions.

Jasleen Dhamija

**LIVING TRADITIONS IN CONTEMPORARY CONTEXTS: the Madhva Matha of Udupi by Vasudeva Rao. Orient Longman, New Delhi, 2002.**

THIS is a thoughtful, reflective, anthropological monograph on the Madhva *matha* of Udupi in coastal Karnataka, building on 18 months of fieldwork centred on this complex of monasteries in a town thick with numerous temples. The complex was founded by the saint philosopher Madhvacharya (1238-1317), and its doctrine and practices refer back to those promulgated by Madhva, one strand within the variegated Brahminical religious order. The monastery incorporates a temple around Krishna, with provision for complex rituals. By examining a sectarian monastery in its social setting, Rao is able to question several prevailing conceptions: about renouncers being 'individuals' standing outside the caste order and indeed outside society at large; about 'sects'

cutting across caste boundaries; about the Brahminical tradition holding the world as an illusion; and so forth. As a monograph in anthropology, it will be appraised in social science journals; here I notice it from the viewpoint of a lay *Seminar* reader.

Successive chapters focus on introducing the enquiry in its intellectual and physical contexts; outlining the monasteries' historical background, contemporary social influence, revolving leadership, physical layout, and patterns of worship; the meaning of food in the monastic complex as it is offered daily to the deity, and then as *prasada*, sacred food, to several thousand devotees (and ten times as many at special festivities)—in several ranked categories of foods and of devotees; the several sorts of teachers and of students in this complex, and the range of pedagogic resources and practices employed. One set of interpretations of the doctrine is maintained as authentic, and the themes here include the institutional practices through which alternate interpretations are marginalised.

The practices at issue include that of initiating adolescent boys into the order and training them to be future monks, though there is a tendency now to wait for them to be somewhat older and more mature; the contrast between (i) *patha*, lessons, when a teacher leads a group of 4-6 male Madhva Brahmin students in reading, and discussing, particular texts of the school closely, and stressing differences with other sectarian traditions, and (ii) *upannyasa* or *pravachana*, an informal religious lecture—a monologue—addressed to an audience of men and women of different castes affiliated with diverse sectarian traditions, bypassing the sectarian differences; the contrast, and the continuities, between the *sannyas*, renunciation, including that in the monk's vocation, and the life of the householder in the Madhva tradition, which too at times aspires to renunciation without taking to monkhood; and, finally, the monastery's responses to the not-so-gentle winds of change in its contemporary milieu in Udupi town and in the larger Indian scene.

The most notable in the latter is the proximity of the monks to the Bharatiya Janata Party-Vishva Hindu Parishad combine. This proximity is reflected in a widespread, passive sympathy, and one monastic leader is active in VHP's Dharma Sansad. Rao attributes this orientation to the monks' expressed desire to sustain the *dharmaic* order amidst pervasive tendencies towards disorder—and a latent wish to buttress the Brahmins' declining fortunes in recent generations.

Even as we thank Vasudeva Rao for giving us this insightful monograph, our gratitude would have been greater but for its deficits in matters of structure, edit-

ing, copy-editing, and proof-reading. Surely it is an act of rudeness to leave the reader to figure out that 'addresses' has to be read as addressee (p. 122), 'neither world' as nether world (148), and 'touch open' as touch upon (184)?

Satish Saberwal

**KAMALADEVI CHATTOPADHYAYA: A Biography** by Reena Nanda. Oxford University Press, Delhi, 2002.

'THE soft unevenness of khadi...' is how the Mahatma once described the texture of the fabric inextricably linked to his name. On another occasion when someone told him the 'trouble' with khadi was that it showed up stains, 'yes,' he said, 'khadi dislikes stains of any kind.' I have often thought of both those descriptions of handspun in connection with Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay. There was a softness to her but no smoothness, her fabric a bit like khadi, with little irregularities of yarn and weave which made her completely un-assembly line. And she could not abide the stains of cant or compromise – intellectual, political, or personal.

Not surprisingly Kamaladevi came to be admired and even extolled as an icon but never either fully understood or integrated into inner circles, whether of society or of the establishment. Stories grew around her, getting more and more garbled and imaginative with time; creating a legend, a mystique. Stories of how she outshone the brilliant Sarojini Naidu as her not-so-demure sister in law, how she raised her heavily banged arm to show her turbulent husband the door, received but did not return the romantic gaze of some hugely famous dare-we-say-who.

A hush would descend on any gathering when Kamaladevi arrived. A respectful cessation of chatter, as people made aisles for her to pass. Few, very few, in the shallow gaggles of the New Delhi of the '60s, '70s and '80s would dare try with her the meaningless hug and peck so characteristic of its superficiality. Everyone knew she *knew*. Knew the ins and outs of our political struggle in the '30s and '40s, of our fumbling starts at nation-building in the late '40s and early '50s, of the rise and subsidence of socialism in the '50s and '60s, of the victory in the '70s of chic artiness over the cottage floor integrity of hand-created objects, and the rise in the '80s of *salon* patronage as opposed to grass-roots support and, over the entire half-century since independence, the steady overlay of starch on stained

khadi, its transformation from the livery of freedom into the attire of office. She knew it all.

Governorship, ministership, ambassadorship were like *kaghaz ki kashtis* to her, flimsy nothings meant to capsize. 'A minister of state position was offered to me by Jawaharlal at the very start,' she once said in a rare moment of autobiography. 'I was too proud to take it. If Rajkumari was to be of cabinet rank – and quite rightly – I saw no reason why...' she left the sentence incomplete. 'In any case there was so much to do outside government!'

Reena Nanda has encapsulated in her designedly brief biography the essential 'thingness' of that compelling figure. Her refusal, for instance, to be taken for granted by anyone – parents, once-husband, son, colleagues, even – why 'even' – *especially* the leader, Gandhiji. She portrays the Congress Socialist Party phase of Kamaladevi's story well, analysing within the space available to her the springs of that noble initiative. Jayaprakash Narayan emerges as a sensitive figure whom history kept nudging but not wafting up into power. Femininity and the centrality of gender issues in Kamaladevi's life are explained well though the difference between her approach and that of some radicals is not defined. Also touched upon but only touched upon, not filled out, is Kamaladevi's amazing large international constituency. She had the closest friends in several countries among politicians, artists, writers.

When I saw the title calling her Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya, my heart sank. If the biographer can make that very common (but, in a biography, serious) mistake – of putting an extra 'a' at the end of her surname, what other carelessness was one to expect? But no, barring very few and understandable misspellings (e.g. C.R. Rajagopalachari for C. Rajagopalachari, Narendra Dev for Narendra Deva and K.M. Pannikar for K.M. Panikkar), the book is meticulous about dates, details, events. It also provides some carefully researched depictions of the epic story of this woman without turning her into a touch-me-not goddess. I liked the honesty of the biographer when she says she cannot understand how Kamaladevi could let an ugly building like the crafts museum (on Deendayal Upadhyay Marg, New Delhi) come up right under her nose.

The author admits, with admirable and becoming frankness, that she is not an academic. That in fact is the redemption of her effort. She has written the book with the simplicity but not the casualness of a conversation, telling the reader what this extraordinary woman was all about. I have no doubt if Reena Nanda was not writing a book designed to be concise, she would have



investigated her subject more thoroughly. She would then have explored the complex equations of Kamaladevi with the 'greats' of the time, notably, Jawaharlal Nehru and Subhas Bose. And with women contemporaries like Kamala Nehru, Aruna Asaf Ali, Mridula Sarabhai, Rukmini Arundale, and Indira Gandhi. And she would not have let a person as crucial to Kamaladevi's life as Srinivas Malliah go with but a feather touch.

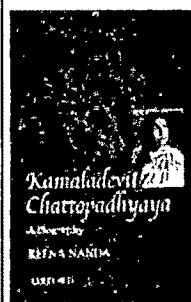
Kamaladevi's non-contemporary peer, Pupul Jayakar does not really figure in the narration. Pupul too was an extraordinary person, with an intellectual and spiritual depth her external sophistication hid. Sarcas- tically called 'czarina', Pupul reigned over the empire of material culture in Indira Gandhi's realm. And reigned with elan. That was when Kamaladevi seemed like an ancient Sakuntala living among the creepers and crea- tures of her memories, the India International Centre being her Kanva tapovana. Did the slipping of her natural territory rankle? It could not but have. How did she sublimate it? Surface observers would say Pupul was 'merely' an organizer, Kamaladevi the 'real thing'. Organizing is no 'mere' matter. Nor was Kamaladevi unendowed with organizing skills. Besides, Pupul had also been kindled by the Gandhi flame and was kept cerebrally and spiritually 'awake' by her access to J. Krishnamurti's mind. Pupul was never lonely; Kamaladevi was. Reena Nanda says as much, honestly, simply. She hints at – and for me, this was news – Kamaladevi's proximity to Satya Sai Baba. The equa- tion, if it was strong, called for more than a hint.

Where Reena Nanda has made her most valuable contribution is in the handling of Harindranath Chattopadhyay. Kamaladevi was always reticent about that teaming. The subject was virtually taboo in conversations. Harindranath was a storm that raged all around her while she was ever the rock, *achala*. The book gives us a clear sense of that elemental mismatch.

The principal source for Kamaladevi Chatto- padhyay's life-story will remain her memoirs, *Inner Recesses*. But Reena Nanda's little biography will be a valuable concordance volume, even as Kamala Ratnam's earlier work performs that service in Hindi. A fuller story, uninhibited by word-limits, navigating the widths and depths of her rise in the Western Ghats like a proud but nourishing Cauvery, sometimes in flood, but often moving so low as to seem still and insufficient, will have to be told one day. Meanwhile, Reena Nanda's biography will keep historiographic appetites whetted. And one has to be grateful for that.

Gopal Gandhi

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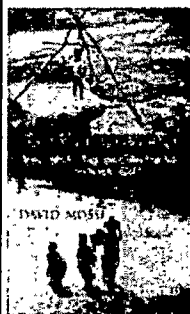
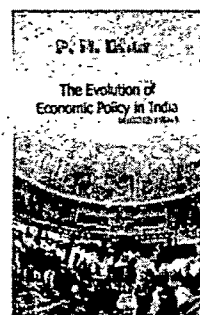
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# Essay

## Vast Sargasso Sea

THE political rhetoric of marginal fundamentalist groups who pose as dominant groups holding the country and its people to ransom appears most sharply when it attacks individuals for being aliens.

The question of time and history are central metaphors which push back the question of the past, the recognizable past, to a point of no return. Oddly the contestation of how this past is constructed is the central question of modernity. When a landscape is destroyed by natural or social means a new metaphor is forged in concrete terms. The landscapes of modernism arising out of war and technological revolution have all communicated their idiom of rationality which may be contested by others. Today, I am concerned with how political ideologies can leave their imprint upon the mind, upon forms of writing and literature. As Kevin Lynch would say 'What time is this Place?'

Many years ago, perhaps in 1990, Ananthamurthy the Kannada litterateur spoke at the NMML, Delhi of the coexistence of time. He argued that every individual lives many different kinds of social lives which overlap and conflict with one another – some modern and rational, some feudal and caste based. Today, the domination of caste based behaviour in national life organizes the presence of an orthodoxy of tradition in its oppressiveness. And citizenship and writing become two indexes by which this oppressiveness is to be analyzed.

If the idiom of political hegemony centres the substance of its attack through the method of aliena-

tion, then it can only be a short lived, violent and ugly mode – as all fascist programmes are. State rule, even in the forms of patrimony and kingship, has always depended on the consensus of the people to be ruled. If *lathi* and cannon represent the mode of legitimating coercion in a democracy, the ability to protest will emerge and forge new modes of dissent. The politics of domination, however pervasive the cogs that operationalise the hegemonic core, cannot govern; it can only annihilate, and its rule is entrenched only for the private profit of its mercenaries – money, status and power. The landscapes of memory will continue to express the varieties of ways in which human beings have solved the problems of discord – of lust for coercion and the destruction of the humane. Without a belief in the future, the present can have no meaning.

'Disaster, preservation, renewal, growth, revolution' are different modes of this transformation of the landscape (Lynch 1995; 28) and they 'connect our hopes and memories and sense of time flow.' In a similar vein, the human consciousness of time and of events of peace and prosperity is not stable. By idealizing the past we cannot serve the present or the future, nor deny that the substantial presence of poverty has been the lot of the people. The wealth of India has lain in the faith of the poor, an optimism which Gandhi understood only too well, surviving the avarice of the ruling classes.

The theme of my paper is thus to analyse what it means 'to be a foreigner in one's own country' – significant at a time when journalists can refer to an Indian of Indian origin as alien (*Hindustan Times*, 10

\* Paper presented at the seminar held in honour of Professor T.K. Oomen, 21-23 October 2002 at the Centre for the Study of Social Systems, Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi.

September 2002). The term alien can be located in terms of familiar concepts of Sociology – to be a stranger, to be excluded, to be alienated, to be a non-citizen though one may have a Pan card or a ration card. It could equally apply to beggars, the poor, people like me who have suddenly been marked out as alien for political purposes, or those foreigners who accept citizenship and request that they be seen as such in order to marry, bear children, be buried here or to stand for elections.

Before 11 September 2001, an estimated 38,000 Indians, according to media reports, migrated to America every year on one or another kind of visa. In the land of chewing gum and rock, belonging depends upon the acceptance of language as both monosyllabic and homogenizing. In such a context it is interesting to note that a variety of separatist movements had their origin in America. Joyce Pettigrew's book on Punjab describes the growth of separatism around fundamentalist forms of Sikhism and journalists have recorded the agonizing years of the complexities of the state and its people in relation to terrorism. Whether it is Hinduism, Islam or Christianity, the substance of this financial support from fundamentalist expatriates to drive the separatist wedge into India needs to be analysed.

Much of the political rhetoric of Hindutva comes from asking the questions, 'When did you come' and 'What makes an alien.' Obviously this could apply to an idea, a community, a party – any fact of identity that blurs questions of belonging as codified by the Constitution. It seems apparent too that if this question was really posed by the *dasyus* of India who have been colonized now for millennia, the political imperative of throwing half the population out would be apparent and frightening. There is of course the recently propagated American laboratory and Indian media myth that upper caste men are Aryans (whatever that means) and lower caste men and all women are *dasyus*. The speculation around invaders, travellers, settlers is the stuff of archaeology and ancient history – all that we can do is analyse the mass of information that is put across and try to understand the contexts of its interpretation in objective or political terms. It's been made amply clear to sociologists that to be objective, rational and analytical is also now a self-conscious political act.

Now the central task of Sociology remains singularly clear – that is to ask why people do the things they do. If the rhetoric of homogenization has never worked except amongst political lobbyists, then the risks of diversity are interesting in themselves. The rights that human beings have are well defined in vari-

ous charters, and embodied in the welfare state. But Michael Ignatieff has clearly pointed out that:

'It is because money cannot buy the human gestures which confer respect, nor rights guarantee them as entitlements, that any decent society requires a public discourse about the needs of the human person. It is because fraternity, longing, belonging, dignity and respect cannot be specified as rights that we ought to specify them as needs and seek, with the blunt institutional procedures at our disposal, to make their satisfaction a routine human practice' (Ignatieff 1994: 14).

If we are to understand what human needs are, then the production of literary fiction is one of the key spaces where desires and possibilities are fully suggested or left tantalizingly unresolved. The writing of expatriates becomes significant because each creates an imaginary world through words, but yet communicates the immediacy of events. The Then of myth and legend, of the past as tradition or as history becomes substantially offered as Here and Now. It is the here and now of literary fiction that makes each work survive long periods of time – decades or centuries, rather than the combustible conflagration of the time of the bestseller. Works written in 1930 or 1980 might appear in the year 2000 as fresh and open to interpretation.

Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy* and Amitava Ghosh's *The Glass Palace* are three memorable moments in the development of Indian writing in English which have been analysed by many literary critics. Why they interest me is because all three authors have made their home outside the sub-continent. But they visit often and see themselves as expatriates. If each of these three styles of writing are so far removed from one another, then it is interesting for me to locate within the sociological imagination how being a diaspora Indian can contribute to the writing of literary fiction. Ghosh's command over historical data and the ability to bring it closer to the reader, Rushdie's playful rebellious jibes at politics and hypocrisy, Seth's sensuous and intuitive control over the emotional worlds of human beings – these have been celebrated over and over again in the literary world, as well as in the greatest index for authors, the sale of books.

The expatriate has house, friends, occupation, income in a country, but he dreams of home. He lives in a comfortable metropolis or university town – London or New York, has access to libraries, concert halls, museums accessible to him in the sense that friends and critics are always around. Yet there is a searing

loneliness about their lives which appear in the things they sometimes say, or the unguarded melancholy of their faces on camera. The problem of course lies in the oscillation between the loneliness and solitude of writing. All crafts people understand the chiselling of an object as a singularly lonely task and the moment of sunburst when camera's flash and the stage is set for what is euphemistically called the 'book release'. The fact that a book may bomb or that critics hate it rarely deters the author – each of these authors has written what are thought to be good books as well as a few over-rated ones. Clearly, the survival of the author depends on his or her ability to withstand criticism and to write again.

Whether writing is biographical or not depends upon the author's ability to acknowledge the reservoir of memory he/she draws from. Researched, the novel becomes the key word by which the success of its intellectual frame is acknowledged. Many writers spend a lot of time reading and the sources of that reading might or might not be acknowledged. The self-conscious author today documents his journeys, proving Barthes essay 'The Death of the Author' to be a lie. The author seems continually available to defend his or her story.

There has never been a time when the pressure to conform has not been imposed upon the author. How he or she deals with it is defined by the accidents of temperament and circumstance. How much of the love and death in the novel is autobiographical is left to the coterie of friends who gleefully or with melancholy recognize themselves. But then, does not every reader find resemblances in whichever book they read to people they have known or glimpsed? In 1928, Gorky wrote, 'God has been created in the same manner as literary "types" have, in accordance with the laws of abstraction and concretization. Characteristic exploits performed by a variety of heroes are condensed or "abstracted" and then given concrete shape in the person of a single hero. Traits peculiar to any merchant, nobleman or peasant are similarly "abstracted" and then typified in the person of some one merchant, nobleman or peasant – in other words, now a literary type is created' (Gorky n.d.: 31, 32).

Earlier he had argued that it is not enough to create a person, for this would have neither social or educative features. 'If however the writer proves able to summarise the most characteristic class features, habits, tastes, gestures, beliefs and manner of speech peculiar to twenty, fifty or even a hundred shopkeepers, civil servants or workers, proves able to epitomize and condense them in the person of a single

shopkeeper, civil servant or worker, he thereby creates a type, and that is art' (ibid., p. 30).

Yet Gorky was always clear about the functions of literature – to inform, to educate, to entertain not in malice but through humane and generous anecdotes. This moral pressure was best conveyed in his critique of the 'sponge like existence of younger modernist writers.' In an essay called Talks on Craftsmanship, he wrote:

'Indeed I met quite a number of young people of the merchant class, and I envied them their knowledge of foreign languages and their ability to read European literature in the original. There was nothing else in them to envy. They spoke in polished language, but in a way that was obscure; their words were unimpeachable, but below the surface there seemed to be nothing but cotton wool or sawdust... though they did not drink in excess and grew drunk more on fearful words than on liquor. They spoke of the "horrors" in the work of Poe, Baudelaire and Dostoyevsky, but they thought they were speaking of the horrible things within themselves. I could see that there was nothing horrifying about them; some of the ruffians I knew were more awe-inspiring.'

He goes on to say that public duties were integral to a writer's life. 'If you sweep a courtyard you will prevent harmful dust getting into children's lungs. If you bind a book in good time, you will extend its term of service, helping to make it of greater benefit to people, and saving paper for the state. Rough treatment of books causes tremendous losses to the state, because so many books are being printed, and after all, we are the State' (ibid 153).

Why I quote at length from Gorky is because of the biographical experience of having been given Gorky's *Mother* to read when I was in Class III and all of Shaw's plays when in Class V (I rebelled against reading Shaw's Prefaces in Class VI). Certainly I had no idea that my father who did not like *Anna Karenina* was setting out the agenda of what kind of literature I should be reading.

Thirty five years later the contempt that my father had for elitist emotions – philosophizing about pain – is still hard to bear. Like Gorky, Marxist intellectuals like my father could not bear the rift between the intelligentsia and the people – and it is exactly in this rift that Indian writing in English is located. The strikingly banal but brutal critique of elitist writing by M. Prabha in *The Waffle of the Toffs* is easily available – funny, crude, authoritarian – it sets a norm more clumsy than Gorky's well-crafted idealism. But every

writer unlike every critic, knows that writing has its will to power, and existentialist writers, who are primarily record keepers rather than transformers of the world, understand the impetus of their quill. Take away their implements and they will invent another, but the work will get written.

It is here that I wish to analyse the work of a woman, Jean Rhys, whose book, *The Wide Sargasso Sea* remained alive in spite of her efforts to destroy it, forget it, evade it. The book appeared in 1962, though its first draft had been typed in 1938.

*Sargasso Sea* is an unnerving study of race and caste relationship in Creole society; of colonialism and accidents of history which one day would surely be the subject of detailed symbolic analyses. My problem is more specific. How does Jean Rhys understand her existence as a foreigner in England? Her father was a Welsh doctor and her mother 'white' Creole. She was born in Dominica in 1890 and came to England when she was sixteen, spending what was a conventionally bohemian life moving between various frivolous positions. Suzanne Rouvier (in Somerset Maugham's *The Razor's Edge*), the artist's model, not quite a whore but a practical companion to various aspirants in the Paris art scene, would be an approximate analogy. But Rhys, encouraged by Ford Maddox Ford who had also discovered D.H. Lawrence, was undoubtedly one of the most brilliant women writers of the '30s. Then she fell out of sight. For decades she lived in obscurity, and even had an unwitting obituary notice written for her. She died in 1979, having received acknowledgement when, as she said, 'it was too late.' She received the W.H. Smith Award in 1966, was made a fellow of the Royal Society of Literature in 1966 and made a CBE in 1970.

I am unable to engage with a biographical sketch of Rhys in order to answer my question and will instead try to approach it through textual analyses. Why the problem seems to me evanescent is because so many of us who have never doubted that we are Indians are now being continually pounded with the question 'Who are you?' Asked often enough it can push a person beyond the edge. If asked as anthropologists do, in a mode of dialogicity, I see no problem with the question. Asked in psychoanalytical therapy or in the quest for mystical resolution, this space can be one of the most profound arenas of creative encounter. Yet the political negotiations of identity are a fact of history, an emblem of social change, and fictional narratives sometimes capture this with a power of representation.

*Wide Sargasso Sea* lies between the West Indies and the Azores, in the North Atlantic ocean. Ships could

become entangled in its weeds. It is the metaphor for calm and danger, for the ability of encroaching weeds which strangle the beleaguered ship. The West Indies become a complex battling ground where indigenous, black, tribal, native, colonized, white, colonizing all become fraught with multiple meanings as do the relationship between those who have mixed or pure French or English ancestry.

Rhys was in England and writing about Dominica or Jamaica which she blurred with artistic license. So let us use West Indies or the Caribbean as an artificially organizing term, though the specificities of history and topography for the islands and its cultural landscapes may in fact differ substantially. After all terms such as Bharat, Hindustan or India have served as variable terms for a diverse and polyglot land, and 'subcontinental' identity is even more problematic.

So in Rhys' text which begins with the assertion by the heroine Antoinette that 'the Jamaican ladies had never approved of my mother not just because of her beauty but because she was a "Martinique" girl.' Black people jeered at the mother and daughter but as servants in the house they had tremendous power over their half caste masters. It was the house and the garden that communicated a tremendous sense of power – the power of land, the power of the past, the power of memory.

'Our garden was large and beautiful as that garden in the Bible – the tree of life grew there. But it had gone wild. The paths were overgrown and a smell of dead flowers mixed with the fresh living smell. Underneath the tree ferns, tall as forest tree ferns, the light was green. Orchids flourished out of reach for some reason not to be touched. One was snaky looking, another like an octopus with long thin brown tentacles bare of leaves hanging from a twisted root. Twice a year the octopus orchid flowered – then not an inch of tentacle showed. It was a bell shaped mass of white, mauve, deep purples, wonderful to see. The scent was very sweet and strong. I never went near it.'

Sitting in England, such a para was written – the intensity of the past surfaces and much of diaspora writing actually captures what are seemingly visible details of topography to actually communicate how haunting the past and its dreamtime seems to the writer. But what is diaspora, and who is diasporic? As a Malayali who was born in Delhi and who often writes about Kerala, this chatter about diaspora as alien is empty for me. The diasporite makes himself or herself at home, is at home; she or he sends out deep roots in less than a month of his arrival and is here to stay. Peo-



ple are pushed out, have their heads bludgeoned in, but they fight to stay or they fight to return.

Antoinette's mother is driven mad by a holocaust of hate – slave owner attacked by night, her retarded son by her first husband killed, her house burnt down, her second husband helpless as the house burnt down. Antoinette remembers:

'But now I turned too. The house was burning, the yellow red sky was like sunset and I knew that I would never see Coulibri again. Nothing would be left, the golden ferns and the silver ferns, the orchids, the ginger lilies and the roses, the rocking-chairs and the blue sofa, the jasmine and the honeysuckle and the picture of the Miller's daughter. When they had finished, there would be nothing left but blackened walls and the mounting stone. That was always left' (p. 24).

If ruin and the memory of a foundation is all that the survivor has, and the memory of things that once had a pattern of normality, then the tragedy of the present lies in that continuing absence which like the ghost of an amputated limb thrashes in the victim's memory. As Rhys writes in the second paragraph of the first page, 'My father, visitors, horses, feeling safe in bed – all belonged to the past.' The tragedy of the colonizer is the moment of seduction – when the native, the Creole, or the woman has been lulled into a state of secure concupiscence. Rhys uses the imagery of sexual love as represented by the white male in relation to the Creole woman to understand this peculiar form of submission. The violence of seduction lies in its mutual pleasure and the shattering quality of boredom annihilates both. Significantly the colonizer and the colonized blame one another, seeing their autonomy either in the past or in the future as an obliterated dream.

'Why do you hate me?' she said.

'I do not hate you, I am most distressed about you, I am distraught.' I said. But this was untrue, I was not distraught, I was calm, it was the first time I had felt calm or self possessed for many a long day... I watched her holding her left wrist with her right hand, an annoying habit.

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'Then why do you never come near me?' she said, 'Or kiss me or talk to me. Have you any reason?'

'Yes,' I said 'I have a reason' and added very softly, 'My God.'

'You're always calling on God' she said, 'Do you believe in God?'

'Of course, of course I believe in the power and wisdom of my creator' (Rhys 2000: 81).

Having driven his wife to insanity the colonialist Rochester leaves her in England.

'When I first came I thought it would be a day, two days a week perhaps. I thought that when I saw him and spoke to him, I would be wise as serpents, harmless as doves. I give you all I have freely I would say, and I will not trouble you again if you will let me go. But he never came' (p. 116).

All the people in the house become ghosts for the mad woman in the attic, voices and memories without substance.

'All the people who had been staying in the house for the bedrooms doors were shut, but it seemed to me that someone was following me, someone was chasing me, laughing' (p. 112).

In the end there is a conflagration, 'On the second floor I threw away the candle... I knew how to get away from the heat and the shouting, for there was shouting now... I don't know how long I sat. Then I turned around and saw the sky red and all my life was in it. I saw the grandfather clock and Aunt Cora's patchwork, all colours. I saw the orchids and the stephanotis and the jasmine and the tree of life in flames. I saw the chandelier and the red carpet downstairs and the bamboos and the tree ferns, the gold ferns and the silver and the soft green velvet of the moss on the garden wall.'

Homesickness so terrible that nothing is real, only the past beckons. Amitava Ghosh's consummate obituary on the Indian born American Shahid Aga, captures it in almost Sontagian detail. The corollary to such homesickness is madness and death. Yet many of us live in this strange, beckoning world of the past or another land – it is not merely the stuff of expats longing. The Macaulayised Indian fictionwriter knows the bylanes of Bloomsbury as well as the *galis* of Chandni Chowk – meaning not very well, but the map is real and haunting. Sitting in Delhi or Brooklyn, Calcutta calls forth. No human being can be devoid of this intense longing that has always been the stuff of literary fiction. Claiming citizenship, identity, home, nation is always a tenuous and self-conscious task.

Susan Visvanathan



# Essay

## The India-Pakistan conflict: towards the failure of nuclear deterrence

THESE are dismal times for peace in South Asia. Since the tests of May 1998 and their overt nuclearization, Pakistan-India relations have visibly deteriorated. Crisis has followed crisis and nuclear weapons have played an increasingly prominent role. The massive military mobilisation and threat of war in spring of 2002 exposed several important features of the dynamics shaping nuclear South Asia, especially the repeated use of nuclear threats and the apparent fearlessness of policy-makers and the public when faced with the prospect of nuclear war.

The context for these developments is a growing unwillingness among political and military leaders in South Asia to confront changed realities (but as Einstein famously remarked, the bomb has changed everything except our way of thinking). An arms race is growing, in fits and starts, as best as the two states can manage. Military doctrines are interlinked in ways that lead inexorably to nuclear war. The poor are uneducated, uninformed and powerless. The well-to-do are uninformed or possessed by the religious fundamentalism – Islamic and Hindu – that is rapidly changing both countries. These forces are now being wedded to nationalism in ways that suggest restraints that were at work in previous India-Pakistan wars and crises may increasingly be over-ridden or suppressed. We are moving down a steep slippery slope whose bottom we have yet to see.

The efficacy of nuclear deterrence is predicated on the ability of these weapons to induce terror. It presupposes a rational calculus, as well as actors who, at the height of tension, will put logic before emotion. Recent events in South Asia have put all these into ques-

tion. We therefore fear that perhaps a new chapter may someday have to be written in textbooks dealing with the theory of nuclear deterrence.

Time is short for South Asia. The role of the United States is key. It has begun to worry more about the spectre of nuclear armed Islamic terrorism than the prospect of a South Asian nuclear war. But the Bush administration's unconstrained, unilateral, imperial vision has little space for restraint, treaties, and undermines the possibility of peace and disarmament for all.

There are a few steps that may possibly begin to take us a small distance down the path to safety. These are outlined briefly by way of a conclusion.

### Crisis After Crisis

There is a fundamental link between crises and nuclear weapons in South Asia. Soon after the defeat of Pakistan by India in the 1971 war, Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto called a meeting of Pakistani nuclear scientists in the city of Multan to map out a nuclear weapons programme. Pakistan was pushed further into the nuclear arena by the Indian test of May 1974, seen as a means to further consolidate Indian power in South Asia.

Challenged again in May 1998 by a series of five Indian nuclear tests, Pakistan was initially reluctant to test its own weapons out of fear of international sanctions. Belligerent statements by Indian leaders after the tests succeeded in forcing it over the hill. But success brought change. Pakistan saw nuclear weapons as a talisman, able to ward off all dangers. Countering India's nuclear weapons became secondary. Instead,

Pakistani nuclear weapons became the means for neutralizing India's far larger conventional land, air, and sea forces.

In the minds of Pakistani generals, nuclear weapons now became tools for achieving foreign policy objectives. The notion of a nuclear shield led them to breathtaking adventurism in Kashmir. Led by Chief of Army Staff General Pervez Musharraf, Pakistan sent troops out of uniform along with Islamist militant fighters across the Line of Control to seize strategic positions in the high mountains of the Kargil area. The subsequent Kargil war of 1999 may be recorded by historians as the first actually caused by nuclear weapons.

As India counter-attacked and Pakistan stood diplomatically isolated, a deeply worried Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif flew to Washington on 4 July 1999, where he was bluntly told to withdraw Pakistani forces or be prepared for full-scale war with India. Bruce Riedel, Special Assistant to President Clinton, writes that he was present in person when Clinton informed Nawaz Sharif that the Pakistan Army had mobilized its nuclear-tipped missile fleet.<sup>1</sup> (If this is true, then the preparations for nuclear deployment and possible use could only have been ordered by General Pervez Musharraf at either his own initiative or in consultation with the army leadership.) Unnerved by this revelation and the closeness to disaster, Nawaz Sharif agreed to immediate withdrawal, shedding all earlier pretensions that Pakistan's army had no control over the attackers.

Despite the defeat in the Kargil War, Pakistan political and military leaders insisted that Pakistan had prevailed in the conflict and that its nuclear weapons had deterred India from crossing the Line of Control or the international border. This belief may be especially strong in the military, who would otherwise have to accept that their prized weapons were of no military utility.

### Back to the Brink

On 13 December 2001, Islamic militants struck at the Indian Parliament in Delhi sparking off a crisis that has yet to end. Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee exhorted his troops in Kashmir to prepare for sacrifices and 'decisive victory', setting off widespread alarm. It seemed plausible that India was preparing for a 'limited war' to flush out Islamic militant camps in Pakistan administered Kashmir.

Sensing a global climate now deeply hostile to Islamic militancy, India's ruling BJP have sought to echo the US 'war on terror' slogan as a way to garner international support for their military campaign in Kashmir. Although an embattled Musharraf probably had little to do with the attack on the Indian Parliament, India cut off communications with Pakistan. The Indian ambassador in Islamabad was recalled to Delhi, road and rail links were broken off, and flights by Pakistani airlines over Indian territory were disallowed.

Such Indian reactions have played into the hands of jihadists in Kashmir who now operate as a third force almost autonomous of the Pakistani state (this operational autonomy is typical of such large-scale covert operations, where there is a political need for the state patron to be able to plausibly deny responsibility for any particular action taken by such forces – the US support for the Contras in Nicaragua and the Mujahideen in Afghanistan in the 1980s were classic examples of this relationship). There is a real possibility that jihadists will commit some huge atrocity – such as a mass murder of Indian civilians. Indeed, their goal is to provoke full-scale war between India and Pakistan, destabilize Musharraf, and settle scores with America.

Nuclear threats started flying in all directions. In May 2002, as fighter aircraft circled Islamabad, in a public debate with one of us (PH), General Mirza Aslam Beg, the former chief of Pakistan's army, declared: 'We can make a first strike, and a second strike, or even a third.' The lethality of nuclear war left him unmoved. 'You can die crossing the street,' he observed, 'or you could die in a nuclear war. You've got to die some day anyway.' Pakistan's ambassador to the UN in Geneva, Munir Akram, reiterated Pakistan's refusal of a no-first-use policy.

Across the border, India's Defence Minister George Fernandes told the *International Herald Tribune*, 'India can survive a nuclear attack, but Pakistan cannot.'<sup>2</sup> Indian Defence Secretary Yogendra Narain took things a step further in an interview with *Outlook* magazine: 'A surgical strike is the answer,' adding that if this failed to resolve things, 'We must be prepared for total mutual destruction.'<sup>3</sup> Indian security analyst, Brahma Chellaney claimed, 'India can hit any nook and corner of Pakistan and is fully prepared to call Pakistan's nuclear bluff.'<sup>4</sup>

2. Michael Richardson, 'India and Pakistan are not "imprudent" on nuclear option; Q&A/George Fernandes', *The International Herald Tribune*, 3 June 2002.

3. 'A Surgical Strike is the Answer: interview with defence secretary Yogendra Narain', *Outlook*, 10 June 2002.

1. Bruce Riedel, *American Diplomacy and the 1999 Kargil Summit at Blair House*, Centre for the Advance Study of India Policy Paper, University of Pennsylvania, 2002. Available on the internet at <http://www.sas.upenn.edu/casi/reports/RiedelPaper051302.htm>.

## Nuclear Denial

As India began to seriously consider cross-border strikes on militant camps on the Pakistani side of the Line of Control, it became convenient for those urging action to deny Pakistan's nuclear weapons by challenging its willingness and ability to use them. This is not the first time this notion has been exercised, but it has now gained astonishingly wide currency in Indian ruling circles and carries increasingly grave risks of a misjudgment that could lead to nuclear war.

Two months before the May 1998 nuclear tests by India and Pakistan, a delegation from Pugwash met in Delhi with Prime Minister Inder Kumar Gujral. As a member of the delegation, one of us (PH) expressed worries about a nuclear catastrophe on the subcontinent. Gujral repeatedly assured PH—both in public and in private—that Pakistan was not capable of making atomic bombs. The prime minister was not alone.

Senior Indian nuclear scientists and defence analysts before May 1998 had argued this point: in 1994 P.K. Iyengar, former head of India's Department of Atomic Energy, doubted whether 'there is any proof that Pakistan has this capability' to make nuclear weapons; another former head Raja Ramana suggested that 'In the past, Pakistan got plenty of mileage by making tall claims. But that is now turning into paper mileage'; at the same time, P.R. Chari, a former senior civil servant in the Ministry of Defence argued that the Indian military did not 'believe that Pakistan has a viable deterrent'; in 1993 a Chief of Army Staff, V.N. Sharma, said 'I don't see any threat of nuclear capacity or capability in Pakistan.'<sup>5</sup>

Although Pakistan's nuclear tests had dispelled this scepticism, senior Indian military and political leaders continue to express doubts on the operational capability and usability of the Pakistani arsenal. Still more seriously, many Indians believe that, as a client state of the US, Pakistan's nuclear weapons are under the control of the US. The assumption is that, in case of extreme crisis, the US would either restrain their use by Pakistan or, if need be, destroy them. At a meeting in Dubai this year in January, senior Indian analysts said they were 'bored' with Pakistan's nuclear threats and no longer believed them. K. Subrahmanyam, an

influential Indian hawk who has advocated overt Indian nuclearization for more than a decade, believes that India can 'sleep in peace'.

To fearlessly challenge a nuclear Pakistan requires a denial of reality, which some Indians seem prepared to make. It is an enormous leap of faith to presume that the United States would have either the intention—or the capability—to destroy Pakistani nukes. Tracking and destroying even a handful of mobile nuclear-armed missiles would be no easy feat. During the Cuban missile crisis, the U.S. Air Force had aerial photos of the Soviet missile locations and its planes were only minutes away, yet it would not assure that a surprise attack would be more than 90% effective. More recently, in Iraq, US efforts to destroy Iraqi Scuds had limited success. No country has ever tried to take out another's nuclear bombs. It would be fantastically dangerous because one needs 100% success. Nonetheless, there are signs that India is boosting its military capability to where it might feel able to overwhelm Pakistan.

## Pushing the Arms Race

Since the 1998 nuclear tests, there have been very large increases in Indian military spending. The Indian defence budget for 2001-2002 was set at 630 billion rupees (\$13 billion)—Pakistan's military spending was roughly four times less, about 150 billion rupees. India has announced a further increase of 4.8% for the current year, intended for purchases of fighter planes, submarines, advanced surveillance systems (including Phalcon airborne early warning systems from Israel), and a second aircraft carrier. This increase follows an earlier increase of 28%, which was larger than Pakistan's entire military budget for that year.

In a paper entitled 'Vision 2020', the Indian Air Force has laid out its requirements—it proposes increasing the number of squadrons from 39 to 60 by 2020 and replacing the aged MiG-21 planes with more modern fighters, such as the Russian Sukhoi-30s, or the Mirage-2000 or Rafael fighters from France.<sup>6</sup> This Indian air force internal document is reported also to advocate the creation of a nuclear first-strike capability.

A missile regiment to handle the nuclear-capable Agni missile is being raised.<sup>7</sup> Military officers are being trained to handle nuclear weapons and there have been statements by senior officials about Agni being mated with nuclear warheads.<sup>8</sup> All of this is consistent with eventual deployment.

4. 'India Tests Nuclear-Capable Missile, Angers Pakistan', *Agence France Presse*, 25 January 2002.

5. All quotes from Eric Arnett, 'Nuclear Testing and Stability in Asia', Sixth ISODARCO Beijing Seminar on Arms Control, 29 October-1 November 1998, Shanghai, China. On the web at <http://www.nautilus.org/library/security/papers/ArnettISODARCO.PDF>.

6. Mohammed Ahmedullah, 'Indian Air Force Advocates First Strike Capability', *Defense Week*, 2 January 2001.

Pakistan's generals would like to keep up with India in this effort but the economy is faltering and cannot stand the strain. A recent World Bank report is worth quoting at length:<sup>9</sup> 'The 1990s were a decade of lost opportunities for Pakistan. From independence to the late 1980s, Pakistan outperformed the rest of South Asia. Then in the 1990s progress ground to a halt. Poverty remained stuck at high levels, economic growth slowed, institutions functioned badly, and a serious macroeconomic crisis erupted.'

As and when the economy begins to revive, Pakistan's military leaders will no doubt resume the race.

### Towards War

Pakistani generals know why they want nuclear weapons. They anticipate that in the event of hostilities, India is likely to take losses in a terrain unsuitable for heavy armor or strike aircraft. So it could shift the theatre of war—escalating horizontally but without attacking nuclear facilities. Thereafter India would have several options available to it:

- \* Push into lower Punjab or upper Sindh to sever Pakistan's vital road and rail links.
- \* Destroy the infrastructure of the Pakistan military (communication networks, oil supplies, army bases, railway yards, air bases through the use of runway busting bombs).
- \* Blockade Karachi, and perhaps also Gwadar, Pakistan's other port, currently under construction.

Pakistan's generals have sought to make it impossible for India to achieve these goals. They have articulated a set of conditions under which they will use their nuclear weapons. Pakistani nuclear weapons will be used, according to General Kidwai of Pakistan's Strategic Planning Division, only 'if the very existence of Pakistan as a state is at stake' and this, he specified, meant:<sup>10</sup>

1. India attacks Pakistan and takes a large part of its territory.
2. India destroys a large part of Pakistan armed forces.
3. India imposes an economic blockade on Pakistan (this may include both a naval blockade and a denial of access to Indus River waters).

7. 'Agni Missile Group for Army Cleared', *The Hindu*, 16 May 2002.

8. Vishal Thapar, 'Navy, IAF Train in Handling Nukes', *The Hindustan Times*, 15 February 2002.

9. Pakistan Country Assistance Strategy, World Bank, July 2002, on the web at <http://www.worldbank.org/pakistancas>.

10. Nuclear Safety, Nuclear Stability and Nuclear Strategy in Pakistan: a concise report of a visit by Landau Network—Centro Volta, <http://lxmi.mi.infn.it/~landnet/Doc/pakistan.pdf>.

4. India creates political destabilization or large scale internal subversion in Pakistan.

India, in turn, has started to prepare its military to be attacked by nuclear weapons on the battlefield and to continue the war. The major Indian war game *Poorna Vijay* (Complete Victory) in May 2001, the biggest in over a decade, was reported to centre on training the army and air force to fight in a nuclear conflict.<sup>11</sup> Taken together, Indian military options and Pakistani planning would seem to ensure that any major India-Pakistan conflict would lead inexorably to the use of nuclear weapons.

### Fearless Nuclear Gambling

In early 2002, with a million troops mobilized and leaders in both India and Pakistan threatening nuclear war, world opinion responded fearfully, seeing a fierce and possibly suicidal struggle up ahead. Foreign nationals streamed out of both countries, and many are yet to return. But even at the peak of the crisis, few Indians or Pakistanis lost much sleep. Stock markets flickered, but there was no run on the banks or panic buying. Schools and colleges, which generally close at the first hint of crisis, functioned normally. What explains the astonishing indifference to nuclear annihilation?

In part, the answer has to do with the fact that India and Pakistan are still largely traditional, rural societies, albeit going through a great economic and social transformation at a furious pace. The fundamental belief structures of such societies (which may well be the last things to change), reflecting the realities of agriculture dependent on rains and good weather, encourage a surrender to larger forces. Conversations and discussions often end with the remark that 'what will be, will be,' after which people shrug their shoulders and move on to something else. Because they feel they are at the mercy of unseen forces, the level of risk-taking is extraordinary. But other reasons may be more important.

In India and Pakistan, most people lack basic information about nuclear dangers. A 1996 poll of elite opinion showed that about 80% of those wanting to support Pakistan acquiring ready-to-use nuclear weapons found it 'difficult' or 'almost impossible' to get information, while about 25% of those opposed to nuclear weapons had the same concern.<sup>12</sup> In India, a November 1999 post-election national opinion poll survey found just over half of the population had not

11. 'Bracing for a Nuclear Attack, India Plans Operation Desert Storm in May', *Indian Express*, 30 April 2001.

even heard of the May 1998 nuclear tests.<sup>13</sup> In the middle of the spring 2002 crisis, the BBC reported the level of awareness of the nuclear risk among the Pakistani public was 'abysmally low'.<sup>14</sup> In India, it found 'for many, the terror of a nuclear conflict is hard to imagine.'<sup>15</sup>

First hand evidence bears out these judgments. Even educated people seem unable to grasp basic nuclear realities. Some students at the university in Islamabad where one of us teaches (PH), when asked, believed that a nuclear war would be the end of the world. Others thought of nuclear weapons as just bigger bombs. Many said it was not their concern, but the army's. Almost none knew about the possibility of a nuclear firestorm, about residual radioactivity, or damage to the gene pool.

In Pakistan's public squares and at crossroads stand missiles and fiberglass replicas of the nuclear test site. For the masses, they are symbols of national glory and achievement, not of death and destruction. The realities of nuclear war would be beyond their imagination.<sup>16</sup> It is painfully clear that too few in South Asia appreciate the quintessential feature of nuclear war, which was best captured by Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev when he said that, 'In the event of a nuclear war, the living will envy the dead.'

Previous crises have also seen such lack of fear about the threat and use of nuclear weapons. With each crisis, there seems to be a lessening of political restraints and greater nuclear brinksmanship. A key factor is the absence of an informed and organized public opinion able to keep political and military leaders in check and restrain them from brandishing nuclear weapons. Close government control over national television, especially in Pakistan, has ensured that critical discussion of nuclear weapons and nuclear war is not aired. It is harder to understand the absence of such critical debate in India.

12. Zia Mian, 'Renouncing the Nuclear Option', in Samina Ahmad and David Cortright eds., *Pakistan and the Bomb—Public Opinion and Nuclear Choices*, University of Notre Dame, Indiana, 1998, pp. 47-68.

13. Yogendra Yadav, Oliver Heath and Anindya Saha, 'Issues and the Verdict', *Frontline*, 13-26 November 1999.

14. Jyotsna Singh, 'South Asia's Beleaguered Doves', *BBC*, 4 June 2002.

15. Ayanjit Sen, 'Indians Vague on Nuclear Terrors', *BBC*, 3 June 2002.

16. Matthew McKinzie, Zia Mian, A.H. Nayyar and M.V. Ramana, 'The Risks and Consequences of Nuclear War in South Asia', in Smitu Kothari and Zia Mian eds., *Out of the Nuclear Shadow*, Lokayan and Rainbow Publishers; New Delhi and Zed Books, London, 2001, pp. 185-96.

Because nuclear war is considered a distant abstraction, national civil defense in both countries is non-existent. When asked how India would protect people in case of nuclear attack, the senior-most Indian civil servant charged with civil defence replied 'utter nonsense'.<sup>17</sup> Islamabad's civil defense budget is a laughable \$40,000 and the current year's allocation has yet to be disbursed.

No serious contingency plans have been devised—in 1999 New Delhi's municipal authority made a plan for dealing with nuclear attack involving 200 protective suits for emergency workers and 740 decontamination and first aid kits (greater Delhi has 12-14 million residents).<sup>18</sup> It is reported that even this plan was not implemented. As India's Admiral Ramu Ramdas, now retired and a leading peace activist, caustically remarked, 'In this country people are considered expendable.'

It is unimaginable to think of providing adequate protection against nuclear attack to the many millions in South Asia's mega-cities. We have not been able to provide homes, food, water and health care to so many even in peace time. There is, nonetheless, something to be said for having credible plans to save as many as possible from the folly of their leaders. There might be other benefits also. The experience of the United States and Western Europe shows that the development of such plans and the facts that are introduced into public view showing the impossibility of providing adequate protection for people against nuclear war serves to convince many people of the horrors of what may be in store for them and motivate them to protest to survive.

### The US and South Asian Nuclear Weapons

During the Cold War, to all intents and purposes, the super powers were able to ignore the rest of the world. The fears and entreaties of other countries counted for little in super power strategic planning and policy. In South Asia, the United States and to a lesser extent the international community loom large. This is an important difference and as the Kargil war and the 2001-2002 crisis showed, it can be crucial.

17. Paul Watson and Tyler Marshall, 'There's Nowhere to Hide in India, Pakistan', *Los Angeles Times*, 6 June 2002. Recently the Indian Defence Research and Development Organization claims to have developed an integrated field shelter to protect personnel from nuclear, biological and chemical agents in a nuclear war scenario. The shelter is said to be capable of accommodating 30 people and of giving protection for 96 hours. It is not known whether there are plans for mass production. 'DRDO Develops Foolproof Field Shelters', *Indian Express*, 24 May 2002.

18. Paul Watson and Tyler Marshall, 'There's Nowhere to Hide in India, Pakistan', *Los Angeles Times*, 6 June 2002.

Following India's 1974 nuclear test, perceiving the threat of proliferation and the consequences of India-Pakistan nuclear rivalry, the United States tried unsuccessfully to block the development of a Pakistani nuclear weapons capability through the use of sanctions of various kinds. By the early 1990s, President Bill Clinton was fruitlessly engaged in a campaign to persuade both countries to cap, and then ultimately roll-back their programmes.

After the 1998 nuclear tests, the hope was that the two states could be made to sign the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty. In early 2000, this was on the verge of being signed by Pakistan and India. However, Clinton's efforts were undermined by the refusal of the Republican controlled Senate to ratify the treaty. The treaty died, leaving open the possibility of a resumption of nuclear testing by the US and inevitably by the other nuclear weapons states, including in South Asia. This possibility has grown because of the policies of the Bush administration.

Under President George W. Bush, the US seems set to undo any and all arms control treaties, except those that clearly favour the US. The CTBT was the first victim. The Biological Weapons Convention followed. The US withdrawal from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty is the first withdrawal from any arms control treaty by a state, creating a possibly terrible precedent. These steps have cleared the way for a more aggressive set of nuclear policies.

The Bush administration's January 2002 Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) calls for development of operational strategies that would allow use of nuclear weapons by the US even against those states that do not possess nuclear, chemical, biological or other weapons of mass destruction; it proposes that US military forces, including nuclear forces, will be used to 'dissuade adversaries from undertaking military programmes or operations that could threaten US interests or those of allies and friends' (emphasis added).<sup>19</sup> New special-purpose nuclear weapons such as deep penetration weapons (bunker busters) are already being developed.

As the US has focused on further developing its military capacity to achieve its goals in the post-Cold War world, it has worried less about what India and Pakistan may do to each other. With both India and Pakistan seeking to woo the United States over to their side, the US has little to fear from either. Although it

seems to have taken out insurance. The Nuclear Posture Review recommends 'requirements for nuclear strike capabilities' might include 'a sudden regime change by which an existing nuclear arsenal comes into the hands of a new, hostile leadership group.'<sup>20</sup> Events since the terrorist attacks on the United States on September 11 suggest Pakistan may be a particular concern for the US in this regard.

### Pakistan's Loose Nukes

Immediately after the September 11 attack, although Pakistan's military government insisted that there was no danger of any of its 25-40 nuclear weapons being taken for a ride, it wasn't taking any chances. Several weapons were reportedly airlifted to various safer, isolated, locations within the country.<sup>21</sup> This nervousness was not unjustified – two strongly Islamist generals of the Pakistan Army (the head of Pakistan's ISI intelligence agency, Lt. General Mehmood Ahmed, and Deputy Chief of Army Staff, General Muzaffar Hussain Usmani), close associates of General Musharraf, had just been removed.<sup>22</sup> Dissatisfaction within the army on Pakistan's betrayal of the Taliban was (and is) deep – almost overnight, under intense American pressure, the Pakistan government had disowned its progeny.

Fears about Pakistan's nukes were subsequently compounded by revelations that two highly placed members of the nuclear establishment, Syed Bashiruddin Mahmood and Chaudhry Majid, had journeyed several times into Afghanistan during the last year.<sup>23</sup> Both scientists are well known to espouse radical Islamic views.

It is not impossible that the two Pakistanis could have provided significant nuclear information or materials potentially useful to Al-Qaeda's allies and subsidiaries in other parts of the world. If it so turns out, this will scarcely be the first instance of nuclear leakage. In 1966, sympathizers of Israel working in the US Nuclear Materials and Equipment Corporation were instrumental in diverting more than 100 kilograms of highly enriched uranium for the Israeli nuclear weapons programme, material which was reported by the

19. Nuclear Posture Review, <http://www.globalsecurity.org/wmd/library/policy/dod/npr.htm>.

20. Nuclear Posture Review, <http://www.globalsecurity.org/wmd/library/policy/dod/npr.htm>.

21. Molly Moore and Kamran Khan, 'Pakistan Moves Nuclear Weapons', *Washington Post*, 11 November 2001.

22. Luke Harding, 'Attack on Afghanistan', *The Guardian* (London), 9 October 2001.

23. Kamran Khan and Molly Moore, 'Two Nuclear Experts Briefed Bin Laden, Pakistanis Say', *Washington Post*, 12 December 2001.

CIA to most likely have 'been used by the Israelis in fabricating weapons.'<sup>24</sup>

Pakistan's loose nuke problem underscores a global danger that may already be out of control. The fissile materials present in the thousands of ex-Soviet bombs marked for disassembly, the vast amounts of radioactive materials present in nuclear reactors and storage sites the world over, and the abundance of nuclear knowledge, make it only a matter of time before some catastrophic use is made of them.

### **The Way Ahead – Necessary Shifts**

Those who profit from war are in the driving seat in Washington, Delhi and Islamabad. If South Asia is to hope for better times, then fundamental shifts in all three countries will be absolutely necessary:

*Pakistan:* For five decades school children have been taught that Kashmir is the 'jugular vein' of Pakistan, the unfinished business of Partition without which the country will remain incomplete. This national obsession must be dropped; it has supported three wars and is an invitation to unending conflict and ultimate disaster. As a first step, Pakistan must visibly demonstrate that it has severed all links with the militant groups it formerly supported and shut down all the militant camps it set up for them. Pakistan must find more positive ways to show its solidarity with the Kashmiri struggle for self-determination.

*India:* New Delhi's sustained subversion of the democratic process and iron fist policy in Kashmir has produced a moral isolation of India from the Kashmiri people that may be total and irreversible.<sup>25</sup> The brutality of Indian forces, typical of state counter insurgency efforts to deal with separatists and independence movements, is well-documented by human rights groups. India's rigid refusal to deal with Kashmir's reality must go. A first step would be to withdraw Indian troops and allow democracy and normal economic life to resume and for Kashmiri civil society to begin to repair the profound damage done to that community. This could be done by restoring to Kashmir the autonomy granted it under Article 370 of the Indian Constitution pending a permanent solution.<sup>26</sup>

*United States:* Indian and Pakistani leaders seem to have

abdicated their own responsibility and have entrusted disaster prevention to US diplomats and officials, as well occasionally to those from Britain. There is no doubt that the US is interested in preventing a South Asian nuclear disaster. But this is only a peripheral interest, the United States main interest in South Asian nuclear issues is now driven largely by fear of Al-Qaida, or affiliated groups, and a possible nuclear connection.

This is a valid concern, and as a first step tight policing and monitoring of nuclear materials and knowledge is essential. But this is far from sufficient. If nuclear weapons continue to be accepted by nuclear weapon states as legitimate, for either deterrence or war, their global proliferation – whether by other states or non-state actors – can only be slowed down at best. By what moral argument can others be persuaded not to follow suit? Humanity's best chance of survival lies in moving rapidly toward the global elimination of nuclear weapons. The US, as the world's only superpower, must take the lead.

### **Reducing Nuclear Risks in South Asia**

The gravity of the situation in South Asia is such that commonsense dictates the need for urgent transitional measures to reduce the nuclear risks while seeking a path to nuclear disarmament. An important set of proposals for nuclear risk reduction measures between India and Pakistan was released by the Movement in India for Nuclear Disarmament (MIND) in Delhi on 18 June 2002.<sup>27</sup>

There are many technical steps that can quickly be taken in South Asia, including ensuring that nuclear weapons are not kept assembled or mated with their delivery systems, ending production of fissile material for nuclear weapons, and closing down nuclear tests sites.<sup>28</sup> Again, none of these is a substitute for nuclear disarmament.

There are also steps that might be helpful at the level of nuclear diplomacy, education, policy and doctrine, for example:

*Establish India-Pakistan nuclear risk reduction dialogues.* Such dialogues need to be completely separated from the Kashmir issue, a point of view that Pakistan

24. Leonard Spector, *Nuclear Proliferation Today*, Vintage Books, New York, 1984, p. 124.

25. While a detailed review of events related to Kashmir, and possible solutions, would be out of place here, the reader is urged to evaluate the situation based upon a recent review by an independent Indian scholar Akhila Raman, *Understanding Kashmir – a chronology of the conflict*, <http://www.indiatogether.org/peace/kashmir/intro.htm>.

26. Article 370, adopted in 1949, specifically refers to Kashmir and grants it special status and internal autonomy with New Delhi having authority only over defence, foreign affairs and communications.

27. Movement in India for Nuclear Disarmament, 'Nuclear risk reduction measures between India and Pakistan', on the web at <http://www.mnet.fr/aiindex/nrrmMIND2002.html>

28. Zia Mian and M.V. Ramana, 'Beyond Lahore: From Transparency to Arms Control', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 17-24 April 1999.

must be brought around to. Shared understandings are vital to underpin nuclear crisis management by adversaries. There are interdependent expectations – I act in a manner that depends on what I expect you to do, which in turn depends on what you think I plan to do.

*Commission nuclear weapons use and consequences studies.* There is a need to increase understanding among policy makers and the public of nuclear weapons effects through commissioning public and private studies that will assess impacts of nuclear attacks made by the other on city centres, military bases, nuclear reactors, dams, targets of economic value etc.<sup>29</sup> This will help in making clear the catastrophe that would be caused by a nuclear war and create stronger restraints against the use of nuclear weapons, as well as removing the commonly held, but false, belief that nuclear war is as an apocalypse after which neither country will exist.

*Arrive at a mutual understanding that it is not in either state's interest to target and destroy the leadership of the other and to keep nuclear weapons command centres from urban centres.* Attacking political and military leadership with a view to destroying nuclear command and control is likely to be a strong incentive in early use of nuclear weapons. Given the likelihood of pre-delegation of authority to retaliate, it is most probable that such an attack will not succeed in preventing a return strike. Attacks on leadership also make it very difficult to negotiate and institute an early end to nuclear war after it has started (it might end only when all functional weapons have been used by both sides). Therefore, nuclear command centres should not only be far from civilian populations but also from nuclear weapons storage or deployment sites.

*Declare a policy of not targeting cities.* Nothing can ever justify the deliberate targeting of a civilian population, especially with a nuclear weapon. The population densities of the mega-cities of India and Pakistan ensure that any nuclear attack would lead to hundreds of thousands of immediate fatalities. It should be avoided at all costs.

#### **Pervez Hoodbhoy and Zia Mian**

29. Studies by independent scientists inform public debates and build support for peace movements, see e.g. M.V. Ramana, 'Bombing Bombay', <http://www.ippnw.org/bombay.pdf>, and the earlier cited study by McKinzie, Mian, Nayyar and Ramana. Classic examples are Sidney Drell and Frank von Hippel, 'Limited Nuclear War', *Scientific American*, November 1976, pp.27-37; Kevin N. Lewis, 'The Prompt and Delayed Effects of Nuclear War', *Scientific American*, July 1979, pp. 35-47; Richard P. Turco, Owen B. Toon, Thomas P. Ackerman, James B. Pollack and Carl Sagan, 'The Climatic Effects of Nuclear War', *Scientific American*, August 1984, pp. 33-43.



# Comment

## Iraq and the failure of democracy

THERE is no decision in foreign policy more serious than recourse to war. As the Bush administration prods the country toward an unpopular and illegal war with Iraq, it is a matter of national urgency to question whether our constitutional system of government is providing adequate protection to the American people against the scourge of war. Given the turbulence of the current world scene and considering America's military primacy on the global stage, what the United States does affects the well-being, and possibly the survival, of others throughout the world. So we must question whether our system of representative democracy is currently working in relation to this momentous question of war or peace.

Without doubt the events of September 11 were a test of the viability of our institutions under a form of stress never before experienced – the menace of a mega-terrorist enemy lurking in the concealed recesses of dozens of countries, including possibly our own. To respond effectively without losing our democratic identity in the process required wise and sensitive leadership. It required as well a display of political and moral imagination to devise a strategy capable of dealing effectively with mega-terrorism while remaining ethical and in keeping with our values as a nation. At this point, on the brink of a war against Iraq, a country that has not been persuasively linked to the terrorist attacks of September 11, it is impossible to conclude that our government is meeting this unprecedented challenge. Indeed, the Bush administration appears likely to intensify the danger while further widening the orbit of death and destruction.

The American system of constitutional government depends on a system of checks and balances. Such checks and balances among the three main branches of government is a fundamental principle, and never more so than in relation to war and peace. At the very

least, Congress has the responsibility of restraining a rush to war by engaging in serious public debate. To date Congress has only held low profile hearings some months back. No opponents of the approach taken by the Bush administration were invited to participate in the hearings, which almost exclusively analyzed the costs and benefits of the war option as applied to Iraq. There was no consideration of alternatives to war, no reflections on the dubious legality of the preemptive war doctrine, no discussion of the absence of urgency and necessity that undermined the argument that there was no time to waste in achieving 'disarmament' and 'regime change' in Iraq. Congress has so far failed in its constitutional responsibilities.

In passing the USA Patriot Act shortly after the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks, Congress seriously eroded traditional American guarantees of freedom and privacy found in the Bill of Rights. The Act allows the government to conduct secret searches, provides for FBI access to extensive personal and financial records of individuals without court order or even probable cause of a crime, and creates a new, broad definition of 'domestic terrorism' that could subject individuals who engage in public protest to wiretapping and enhanced penalties.

The open-ended resolution of Congress authorizing the president to resort to force only accentuates its failure to uphold these responsibilities. It would seem that the patriotic mood that followed the terrorist attacks, along with shortsighted anxieties about challenging a popular president, has dulled the critical faculties of Congress as a whole despite the willingness of a small number of senators and congressmen to raise their voices in opposition. As a republic, the US government cannot function properly if Congress fails to exercise its constitutional responsibilities in relation to the ultimate issues of war and peace, and simply gives spineless deference to the president.

Closely connected with this institutional breakdown, is the lamentable behaviour of the Democratic Party, particularly its leadership. They have failed in the role of an opposition party to raise issues of princi-

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ple, especially when so much is at stake. The passivity of the Democratic Party in these circumstances can only be explained by its ill-considered opportunism with regard to domestic politics, including an inappropriate pretension of patriotism. Given the importance of the party system, our governing procedures cannot protect the citizenry against unacceptable policies if the opposition party becomes mute and hides in the face of anticipated controversy.

These issues have been compounded by a compliant mainstream media, especially the corporate-owned news networks. The media has largely viewed its role in terms of promoting patriotic obedience to the government and mobilizing the country for war against Iraq rather than illuminating the debate about whether such a war is justified and necessary. The media has focused its attention on when the war will begin, how it will be fought, and what kind of occupation policy and exit strategy will be attempted. It has refrained from considering the question of why the US should or should not engage in war or from examining the many serious possible consequences to the Middle East and to the US itself of engaging in this war.

There are numerous qualified critics among the American citizenry, as well as overseas, and yet their voices are virtually never heard in the mainstream media. The media tends to orient its analysis around compliant 'military analysts' and conservative think tank policy wonks. Even when prominent military figures, such as General Norman Schwarzkopf or General Anthony Zinni, express doubts about the rush to war, their objections are given virtually no attention. This spectacle of a self-indoctrinated and self-censored media weakens our democratic fabric, depriving the citizenry of information and perspectives that are needed to reach intelligent conclusions as to support or opposition.

Most important of all, the Bush administration seems to be moving toward a non-defensive war against Iraq without providing a coherent account to the American public. It has presented evidence to the UN Security Council suggesting that Iraq retains unreported stocks of biological and chemical weaponry, but has provided no convincing proof of this and certainly no rationale on this basis for war. The American people need to realize that there are at least twenty countries with greater capabilities than Iraq with respect to such weaponry. A number of these countries are far more likely to be a conduit for such weaponry to pass into the hands of al Qaeda or other terrorist operatives, which is the greatest danger.

It is also important for the American people to understand that in the course of an American attack on Iraq, its leadership would only then have an incentive, in their helplessness, to turn such weaponry as they possess over to al Qaeda or to use it against American troops. Without such an incentive, Iraq is likely to remain the most deterred country on the planet, fully aware that any provocative step involving deployment or threats of weapons of mass destruction would bring about the instant annihilation of the Baghdad regime and Iraq as an independent country.

Under these circumstances, we must wonder why the Bush administration, with pro forma Congressional support, is plunging ahead with a war that seems so contrary to reason. There are two lines of explanation, both raising disturbing questions about the legitimacy of governance under the leadership of the Bush administration. The first explanation is that the shock impact of September 11 has upset the rationality of the policy process to such an extent that an unwarranted war is being undertaken.

Part of this explanation is the frustration experienced by the Bush administration in the aftermath of the Afghanistan War. Not knowing what to do next has led the administration irrationally to treat Saddam Hussein as if he were Osama Bin Laden and to treat Iraq as if it were al Qaeda. Such irrationality overlooks the radical difference between responding to a terrorist network that cannot be deterred and dealing with a hostile and unpalatable minor state. War is neither needed nor acceptable in the latter case.

The second line of explanation, the more likely in our judgment, is that the American people and the other governments of the world are not being told the main reasons behind the US war policy. From this perspective, the alleged preoccupation with Iraqi weaponry of mass destruction is largely diversionary, as is the emphasis on Saddam's brutality. The real reasons for the war are oil and regional strategic control, a military beachhead in relation to the volatile Middle East.

Such justifications for war make strategic sense if, and only if, America is pursuing global dominance to ensure that its current economic and military preeminence is sustained into the future. But it is undoubtedly impolitic for the Bush administration to reveal such motives for war. The American people are overwhelmingly unwilling to spill blood for oil or empire. And most of the international community would certainly oppose the war if Washington's strategic goals were made explicit.

The suspicion that the underlying reasons for war are not being disclosed is not based on adherence to a conspiracy theory of government. If we examine closely the worldview expressed years before September 11 by the Pentagon hawks and Vice President Cheney, this understanding of American goals in the world becomes more transparent. What September 11 did was to provide an anti-terrorist banner under which these grandiose schemes could be realized without public acknowledgement. Again, this is not a paranoid fantasy. President Bush explicitly endorsed this vision of America's world role in his West Point commencement address last June, and more subtly, in the major document issued by the White House in September 2002 under the title 'The National Security Strategy of the United States of America'.

We are left then with two related problems. The first is that of concealment from the American people, and the second is the substantive issue of whether the United States should initiate a war to promote this grand design of American power and empire. It seems reasonable to assume that the motives for concealment are connected with the administration's assessment of the political unacceptability of their undisclosed motives for war. This double image of our democratic crisis is particularly troublesome in the face of the breakdown of our constitutional reliance on checks and balances.

But all is not lost. There are many indications that opposition to the war is growing at the grassroots level in America, and has been robust all along among the peoples of the world. In the United States, polling information shows that more than 70 per cent of the people do not support a unilateral preemptive war led by the United States. More than 70 city councils across the country have registered their opposition to a war against Iraq, and the number continues to grow. Recently over 40 American Nobel Laureates went on record opposing a US preventive war against Iraq. More and more Americans are taking to the streets in opposition to the Bush administration's plans for aggressive warfare.

These numbers can be expected to grow and the voices of protesters become angrier as the administration moves ever closer to war. It seems doubtful that this resistance at the level of the citizenry can operate as a check in the short run on White House zeal, but perhaps it can both strengthen the resolve of Congress and the Democratic Party, and convey the wider message that we need to recover trust in government if our constitutional system is to uphold our security and our values as a democratic republic. Already in the US

Senate, Senators Edward Kennedy and Robert Byrd have introduced a resolution (S. Res. 32) calling on the president to provide full support to the UN weapons inspectors to facilitate their ongoing disarmament work and obtain a new resolution of approval by Congress before using military force against Iraq without the broad support of the international community.

The stakes are extremely high. It is not only the prospect of war against Iraq, but it is the whole relationship of the United States to the world. Continuing down the path along which the Bush administration is leading is likely to produce a climate of perpetual fear and war. It is also likely to undermine further our security and our freedoms at home, even moving us in the direction of a police state. Already, American consulates around the world are warning Americans of the heightened dangers that they are likely to face in reaction to the Iraq War.

At home, the colour-coded alert system created by the Department of Homeland Security seems designed to keep Americans in a state of fear without providing them with any positive steps they can take to increase their security. With each passing week the government moves ahead with its claims to exercise sweeping powers that erode our civil liberties while arousing our fears that terrorists are poised to strike at the American heartland. We do not need to have such a future, but it will be difficult to avoid unless the American people exercise their democratic prerogatives and rise in defence of their civil liberties, as well as in support of peace, international law and constitutional government.

**Richard Falk and David Krieger**

## **Adivasi people's movements**

ONE of the most significant moments at the Asia Social Forum (January 2-7) was the coming together of the frontline indigenous/adivasi people's groups from many states in India on a common platform. More importantly, this show could well be the foundation of a nationwide, collective and converged adivasi movement to secure, essentially, their rights to livelihood. Concerted efforts are underway to further this process, with a proposed follow-up meeting of these and other new adivasi groups in March/April this year to discuss the current adivasi situation in various states and for further action.

The adivasi people across Andhra Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Orissa, Kerala and

Tamilnadu adopted a historic, poignantly political declaration at the ASF. The eight point declaration, adopted on 6 January aims to be a call for the adivasi people who are yet to enter this collective movement, an assertion of sovereignty in the immediacy of resource control in the forests and pasturelands – the lifeline of the adivasi people – by the state and other agencies extraneous to the adivasi contexts.

The declaration reads thus:

1. We the adivasi people have a natural, non-negotiable right over the resources including land, water, forests and minerals.
2. We reject the commodification of natural resources in the name of liberalisation and globalisation.
3. We reject the current practices of grabbing people's resources in the name of development under the cover of eminent domain principle, resulting in displacement, disorganisation and destitution of the adivasi people.
4. We oppose the promotion of eco-tourism and entertainment industries in adivasi areas.
5. All areas inhabited by the adivasis should be declared as scheduled areas.
6. We uphold and fight to protect the linguistic and cultural identities of the adivasi people.
7. We call upon all communities particularly the adivasi people to reject, resist and fight back all attempts and claims over land, water, forests, biological resources and minerals by the state and the corporate sector under the banner of globalisation. The right of the community is absolute.
8. We call upon all adivasi people to assert their right to self-rule.

Adivasi movements/groups/collectives present at the ASF included, among others, the National Front for Tribal Self Rule, National Forest Workers and Forest People's Forum, All India Tribal Joint Action Committee, Prakrutik Sampada Suraksha Parishad (Orissa), Jana Sangharsh Morcha, Adivasi Mukti Sangathan (Madhya Pradesh, Chattisgarh), Tudumdebba, Adivasi Aikya Vedika, Girijana Students Union, Adivasula Hakkula Porata Samiti (the last four from Andhra Pradesh).

Interestingly, the reasons for the lack of representation of adivasi groups from the state of Uttaranchal, home to many indigenous communities, are not forthcoming. One reason – which might be debatable – could be the role of numerous NGOs in promoting the World Bank supported Joint Forest Management (now Community Forest Management) programmes in many villages in Uttaranchal. Although this is true of other states as well, there is in states such as AP, MP

and Orissa, a strong opposition, even resistance to the JFM and CFM programmes which, people feel, have shrunk the livelihood spaces of adivasis.

Moreover, there is still a lack (or visibility) of leadership from among the adivasis in Uttaranchal in movements against the several proposed 'development' plans for the state, including dams and mining projects, which seem to have been taken up by few NGOs and groups alone at a peripheral level. This may be one reason for not mentioning the current status of these developmental projects and their possible impacts on the adivasis of the Uttaranchal region at the ASF.

This phenomenon requires further analysis and as such is beyond the scope of the present note. Meanwhile, the eight point declaration, and the convergence of all adivasi groups at the ASF, was a result of processes both within and outside of the adivasi context. The increasing consciousness about political and resource-centred rights among certain adivasi groups has been one of the processes 'within'.

Most visibly working towards such a process have been the adivasi groups in Andhra Pradesh (a state known for a longer, sustained adivasi struggle against state forces – the British and the Nizams – concerning land alienation), Orissa (where again the adivasi struggle predates the neo-liberalisation and globalisation process), Madhya Pradesh (and Chattisgarh, which stands to lose out most as the fledgling state government rushes for corporate investments in mining and other resource plundering activities) and Kerala (with C.K. Janu's landmark struggle to secure land rights for the adivasis).

The processes 'without' have been the policies dictated by the state in the name of development of adivasi areas, the main emphasis being revenue and commercial exploitation of resources. In most cases, the state has merely patronised the adivasis, treating them as 'beneficiaries' rather than as citizens with rights. It is no overstatement that democracy today does not provide the adivasis anything more than a token presence in polity and governance.

In states such as Andhra Pradesh and Orissa, the state governments have welcomed both Indian and transnational corporate sectors in investments that threaten to usurp the natural (or historical) rights of the adivasis over their resources, not to mention the effect on traditional, ecologically regenerative agricultural and other community practices. The pro-industry, non-transparent, non-representational policies of the state have been, in their own way, instrumental in building a strong opposition among the adivasi peoples.

By far the most crucial area of contestation between adivasis and the state has been the ownership and use of forest resources and land. This has also been a point of consensus among adivasi groups from several states. In 1988-89, the report of the Commissioner of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes examined the issue of land. Based on his recommendations, the Secretary's Committee, in consultation with the state governments, made further recommendations, which were accepted by the Government of India. Subsequently, a set of six circulars were issued on 18/8/90 to various state governments.

A distinction was made between 'unsettled (land) claims' or 'disputed land' and 'encroachments'. The GOI circular of 18/8/90 for the first time acknowledged that a number of disputed (land) claims of adivasis were pending, and these had to be regularised so as to distinguish them from 'encroachments'. In the former case, while it was admitted that tribal people have a right to occupy these lands, in the latter case, the state government was given 'discretionary' powers to disallow settlement of land. The six circulars dealt with 'encroachments', 'disputed claims', distinction between 'cultivated' and 'homestead' lands, converting forest villages into revenue villages, among other things.

Although some believed that making a distinction between 'encroachments' and 'disputed claims' could be beneficial to the adivasis in matters of land ownership, these categories of defining the adivasi people's (specifically, and forest users, in general) nature of ownership over natural resources, nevertheless, are impositions arising out of the state's perceptions of its ownership of resources, especially since these have never been claimed under 'private' ownership terms (itself a modern middle class, urban concept) by the people using them in forested tracts in India. Moreover, many villages in India bordering the forest land have traditionally used common land for matters of grazing and gathering fuel wood. With these distinctions, the intrinsic relationship between people and the forests also stands to be questioned.

However, even in case of regularising the lands as per the circular, many discrepancies have been noted. For instance, the departmental authorities are supposed to go by the records of possession of land and its duration of possession, based on 'evidence', and a Preliminary Offence Report (POR) in case of encroachments. In many cases, the adivasi people are unable to provide any evidence of possession. In some cases, as in the Orange Lands (Protected Areas) in MP, where

the state government decided to transfer forest department land to the revenue department, the *pattas* were issued to the people prior to the transfer. There are instances, in such cases, where the records of one department have not been accepted by another.

In Maharashtra, the formal status of 'dali' lands, leased out to the entire village for common use, is not known. It is possible for the government to revoke such a lease as and when it pleases.

A representative from Kashipur in Orissa (from the Prakritik Sampada Suraksha Parishad) narrated the paradox of local self-governance, panchayati raj institutions being promoted without the actual power to affect change in policy. The Bhakra bauxite mining project was sanctioned despite the veto by the gram sabhas of eight panchayats. On the other hand is the question as to how sensitive the gram panchayat institutions themselves are to the effects of the state's development focus.

Meanwhile, the National Front for Tribal Self Rule – a collective of several groups working with the adivasi issues – formed in 1998, has been demanding extension of the 73rd amendment to the scheduled areas, which would protect and represent adivasi interests.<sup>9</sup>

Even prior to the ASF, at different local levels there has been discussion on bringing about a common understanding about 'non-negotiables', on self rule, as well as on the idea of encroachments. In 1994, in AP, there was local resistance to the JFM; besides the conflict between dalits and adivasis over notification of the Valmiki community as a scheduled tribe. In north coastal AP, this community comes under the SC category, and the notification led a number of them to migrate into 'Agency' tracts, thus creating a conflict between the communities over sparse resources.

Similarly, in MP, the state government has been giving land in the adivasi areas to dalits, which could become a contentious issue. The Adivasi Mukti Sangathan has been debating this issue and about its inclusion in the 5th Schedule in order to protect adivasi lands.

The larger context is the politics of external (First World) aid with various state governments and the Ministry of Environment and Forests entering into bilateral and multilateral collaborations in forestry and natural resource management – an issue discussed at length by activists, NGO groups and the adivasis at one of the seminars at the ASF. A representative of the National Front for Tribal Self Rule addressed the current debate on carbon dollar – of the First World

(mainly, America) virtually exchanging its contribution to global warming by way of investing in forests of the Third World to be utilised as carbon sinks.

The ASF meet marks an effort to unite the different state level movements of adivasis. While there were/are area specific issues, there are also certain issues which call for a concerted, common action plan from adivasi groups. One of these includes the circular issued on a time bound action plan for 'Eviction of illegal encroachment of forest lands in various states/union territories' issued in July 2002, which says 12.50 lakh hectares of forest land is under encroachment.

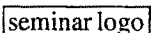
The eviction notice brought out the urgency of the situation, more so in the AP context, where the government has been promoting eco-tourism and community forest management projects in the adivasi areas; issuing licenses to private traders for sale of minor forest produce, besides adding acreage to the reserved and protected forest areas, thereby controlling most of the adivasi areas. In addition, it has come up with the draft grazing policy (in finalization of the AP Forestry Project funded by the World Bank) to regulate grazing by re-introducing the grazing fee on herders in open forests.

Reports in the print media suggest a similar development in Orissa, where a preliminary survey of the 'loss' to forests by grazing of goats (estimated to be 7000 from villages inside Simlipal and 70,000 from peripheral villages inside the tiger habitat) has been made by the Wildlife Society of Orissa. A former forest official is on record asserting that goat grazing is 'much more harmful to forests than timber felling and fuel wood collection.' (*The Hindu*, 8 February, 'Goats Depleting Orissa Forests', p. 7.)

Besides these issues calling for an urgent response, a decision was taken at the ASF to draft a health policy for the adivasis. The Tamilnadu and Kerala adivasi groups demanded implementation of the 5th Schedule, while the focus of the Orissa groups was on mining which has undermined their hold over this resource. The group from Kerala shared their experiences with the struggle against the Coca Cola plant set up at Palaghat.

The adivasi meetings at ASF seem to indicate that the adivasi struggle must be streamlined – gathering adivasis from all the states – towards a more visible, stronger adivasi people's movement. Perhaps it is time for a confrontationist adivasi rights action plan to bring the term 'adivasi' into popular, academic and political debate and focus, as the term 'dalit'.

**R. Uma Maheshwari**

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FORM IV

(see Rule 8)

Place of publication:  
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Periodicity of its publications:  
*Monthly*

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*Indian*

*67-F, Sujan Singh Park, New Delhi 110003*

Editors name, nationality and address:  
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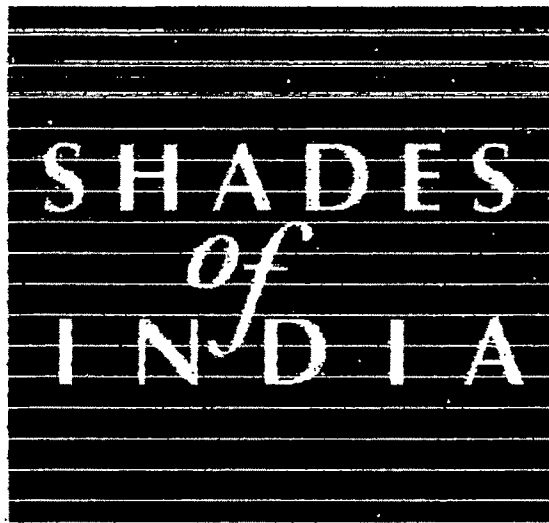
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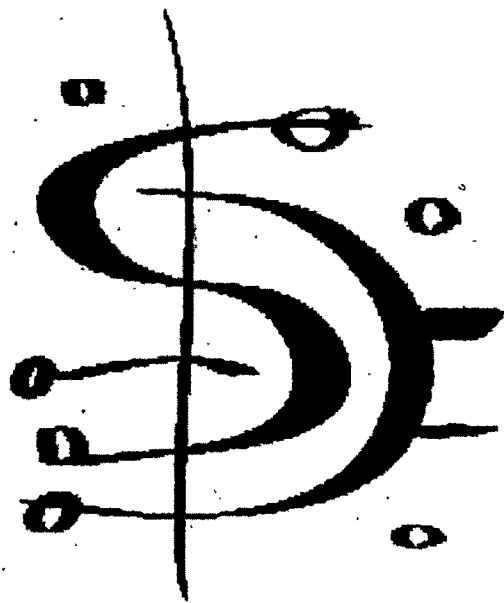
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# Backpage

EVEN as the US led war against Iraq seems depressingly close, public opinion about its morality and legality remains sharply divided. Despite the well-orchestrated campaign by the Bush administration, including the highly-publicised presentation by Colin Powell before the UN Security Council, barring Tony Blair and now the Australian PM, there are few takers for the American case, definitely not that the threatened intervention is for the advancement of human rights and democracy.

It is hardly that the detractors see Saddam Hussein as a 'good guy' – a nationalist hero valiantly battling against US hegemonism. Few buy that he or his regime is democratic, even less an upholder of liberal, democratic values. There is widespread suspicion, probably well-founded, of his regime's support to various terrorist outfits. But equally, few see him as a religious fundamentalist. Iraq and Libya, the other *bete-noire* have been, among all Arab states, in the forefront of the struggle to enlarge public space for women.

Equally evident is the fact that Iraq, even under Saddam Hussein, hardly constitutes a threat to world, even regional, peace. A long war with Iran, defeat in Gulf War I, post its mistaken effort to usurp Kuwait, and a decade of crippling sanctions has left it battered, hardly in a position to act as a frontline state against global stability, even the American way of life. So why the desire to wage war?

Is it that the real text of the war is control of Iraq's oil resources, a suspicion that gains strength given the links of the US administration to the oil lobby? Or is it that Iraq represents the first of many moves to dramatically restructure the Middle East, eventually extending the scope to even Saudi Arabia? Surely it could not only be George W. Bush wanting to finish his father's unfulfilled mission of 1992?

In a prescient article, C. Raja Mohan of *The Hindu* pointed to the rare coincidence of the will to power with the ability to reshape the world in the context of the current US administration. Add to this a missionary zeal, an uncomplicated belief in the righteousness of one's chosen cause. It is this, above all, that makes the current situation so dangerous.

What if the US, with or without UN sanction, and despite the reservation of many of the other powers, actually goes ahead with Iraq. Even if everything unfolds as per its plans and the Iraqi regime capitulates swiftly, will that be the end of the conflict? Not only is

the task of rebuilding Iraq and its institutions daunting, fraught with uncertainty, neighbouring regimes will remain apprehensive about their own future. Also, no one, most of all other contending powers, can remain unconcerned about the implications of untrammelled US dominance.

But what if, as is more likely, the conflict turns messy with incalculable loss of civilian life, a decimation of Iraqi civic and petroleum infrastructure? What if it leads to instability in the region with the war providing proof of the insidious Huntington thesis? Are the US, and those willing to support its venture, ready to face the consequences? More aptly, should we, and the rest of the world, stand by and watch a possible tragedy unfold?

Much has been written both about Iraq's questionable human rights record and its unwillingness to cooperate with global opinion, as reflected in various UN resolutions. But, even if one downplays the inviolability of national sovereignty, it is hardly the case that Iraq is the first, or only, violator of UN resolutions. The record of the United States, as also its principal ally in the region, Israel, is standing testimony to this disregard.

Unfortunately, the US has gone too far down the war path to back down now. If it does it faces the real danger of losing face, unacceptable when perceptions are as important as facts in governing international power relations. That is why even if Saddam can be persuaded to step down and seek exile, the effort to restructure the country, and the region, is unlikely to end.

It is this unmentioned fear of the world being irremediably altered by those who have the power and the will to exercise that power, seeking to redefine extant rules of the game, that lies at the heart of the current unease. The fact that many countries, including the US, have witnessed massive anti-war demonstrations adds little assurance that sanity will prevail.

Isaiah Berlin once wrote that real life rarely presents neat choices. Rather, it involves exercising uncertain means to uncertain ends. With both good and evil so persistently meshed in shades of grey there should be little surprise that public opinion remains so deeply confused. The forthcoming war with Iraq has only one certain outcome – that our world will never be the same again.

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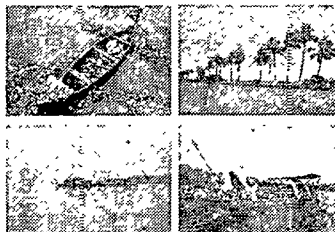
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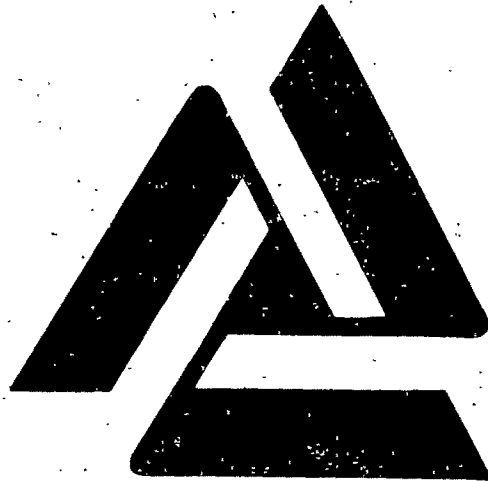


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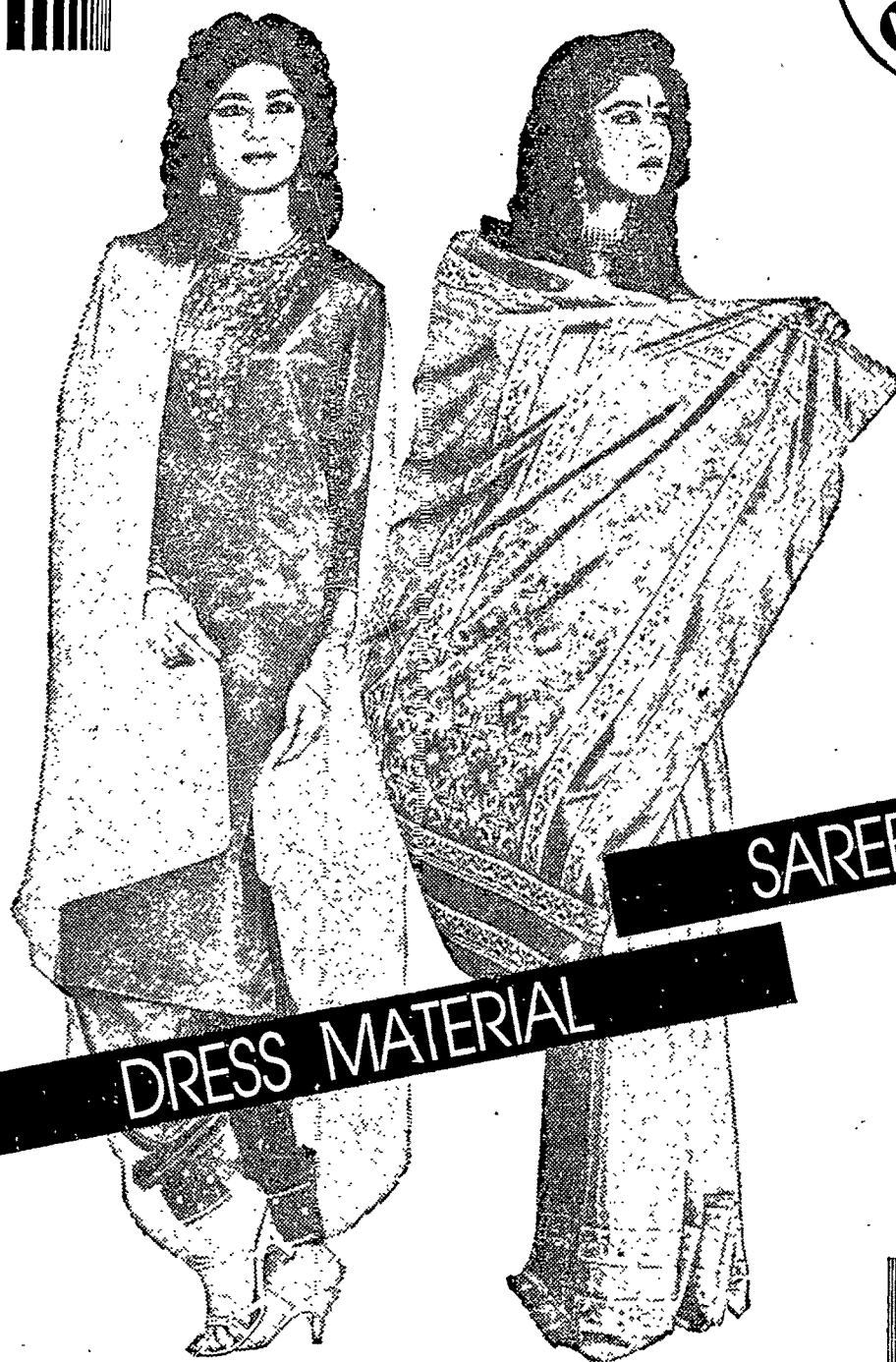
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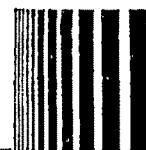
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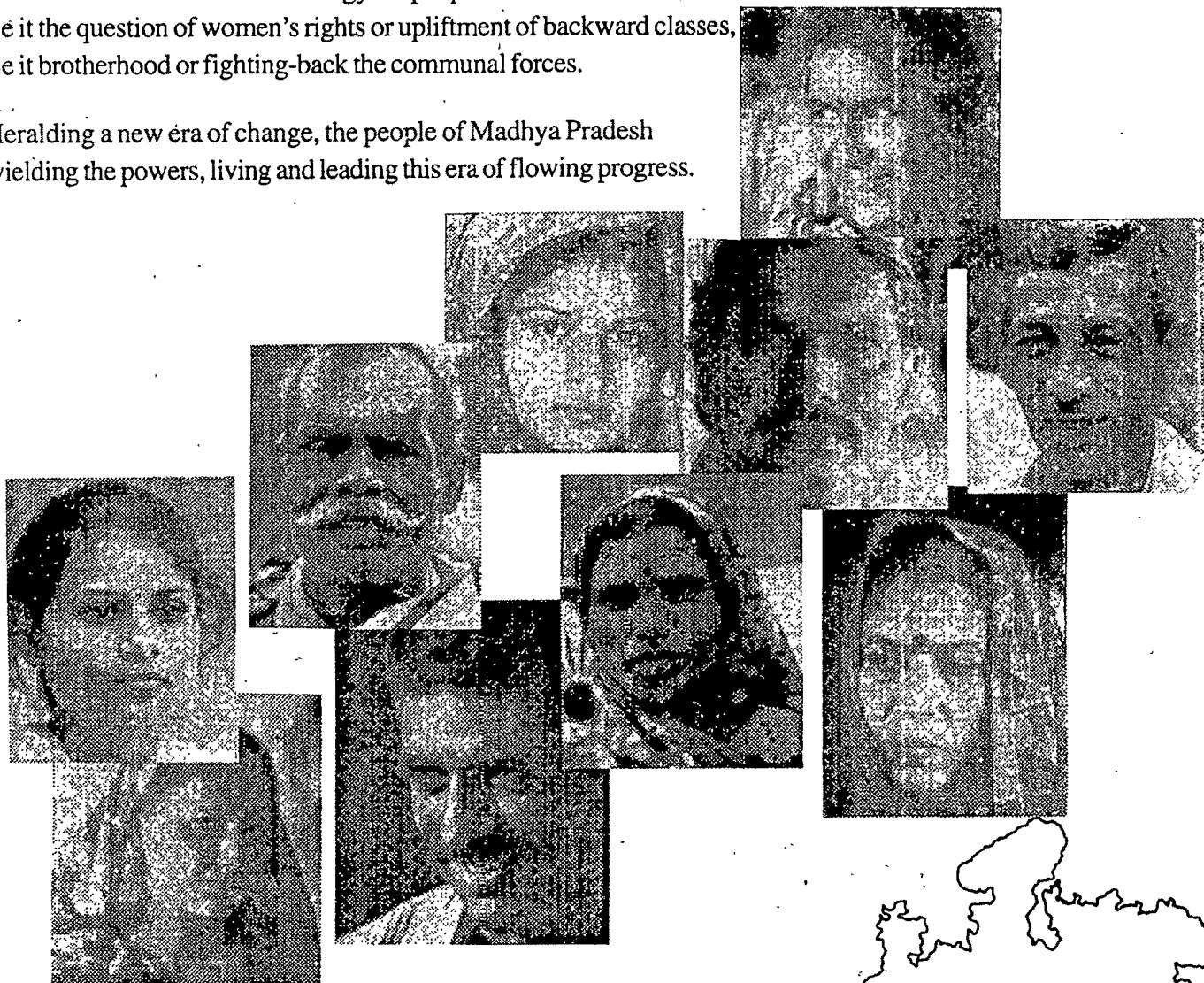
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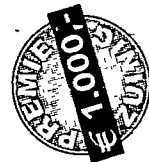
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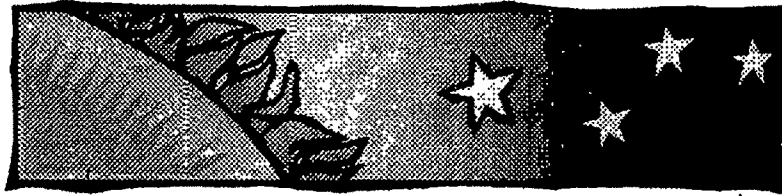
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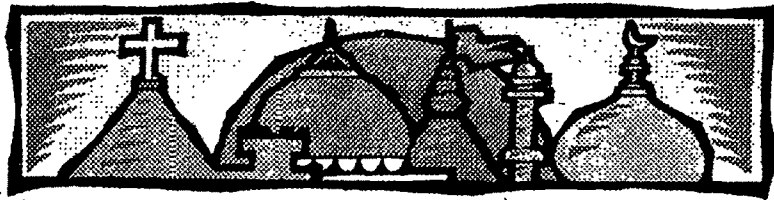
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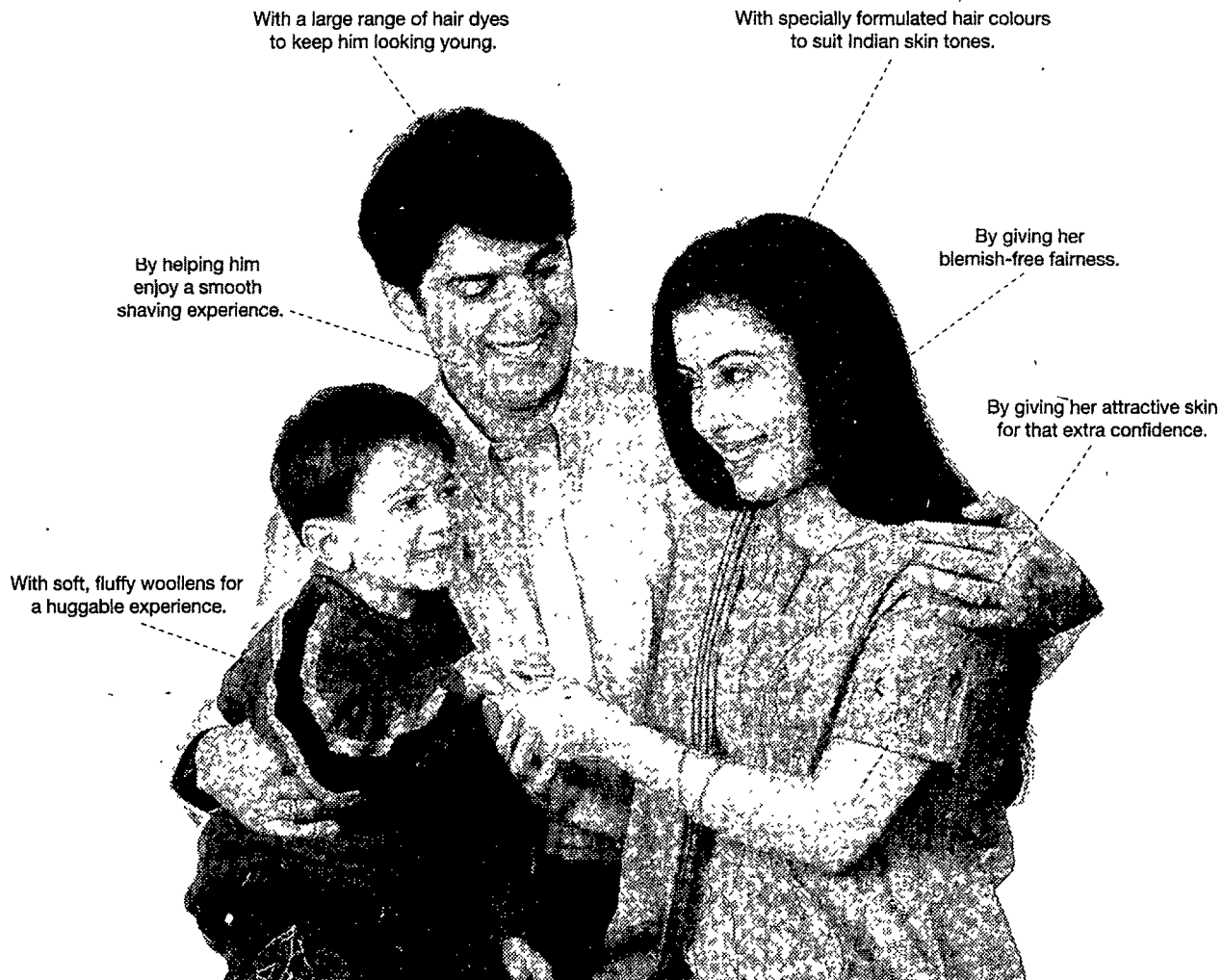
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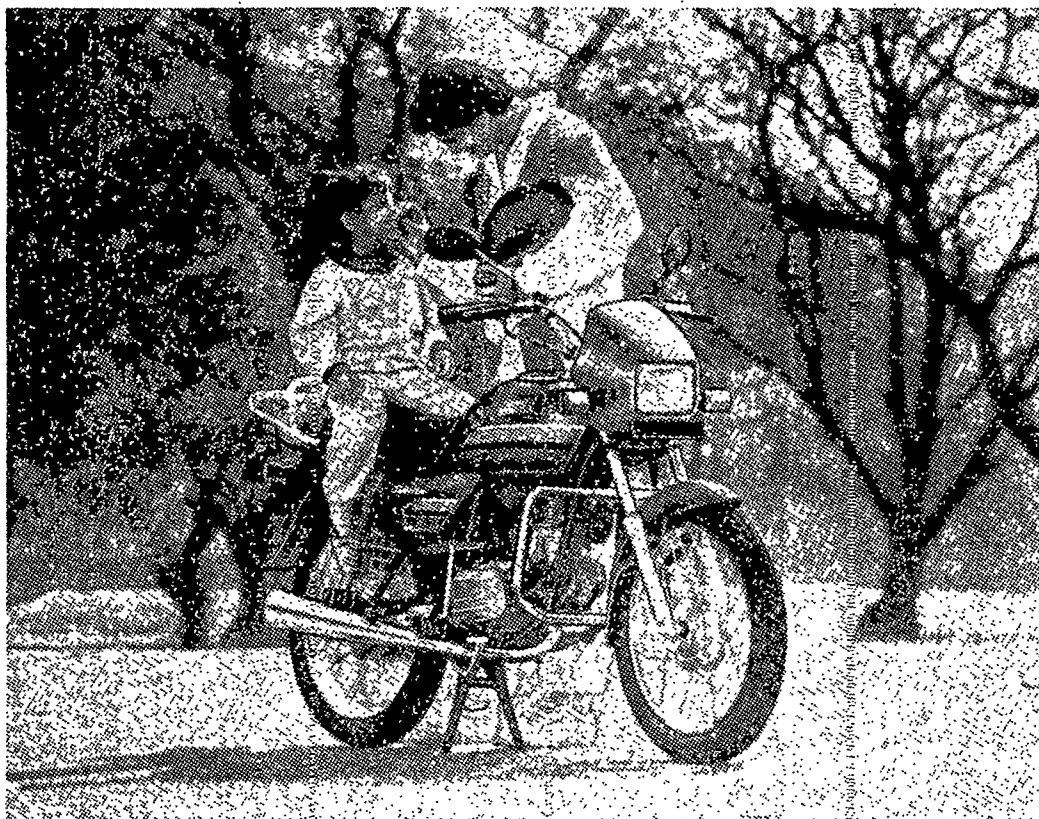
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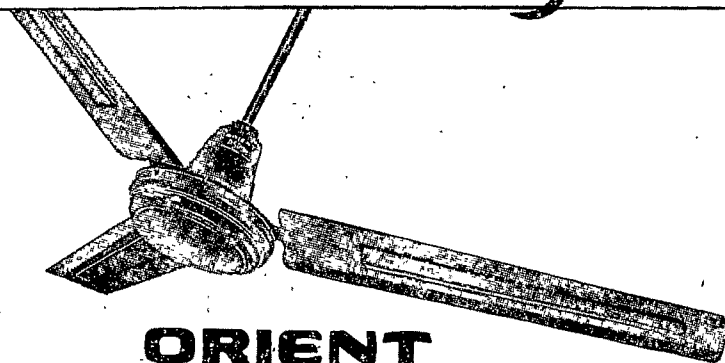


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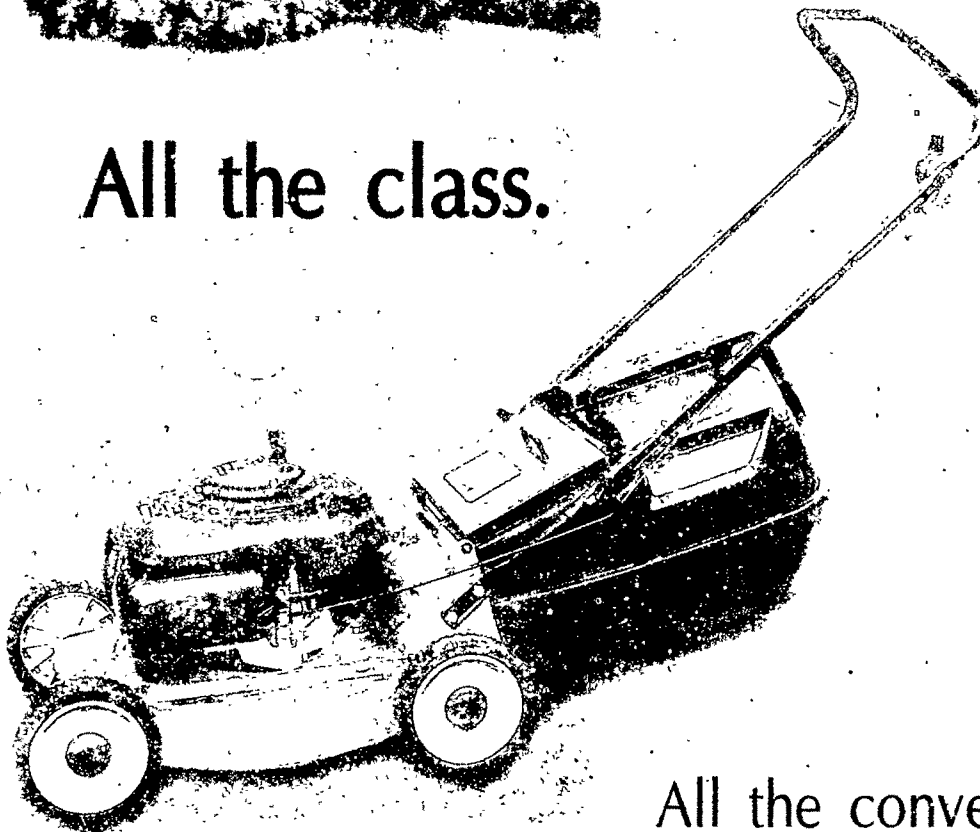


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Designed by **Akila Seshasayee**

# The problem

THIS symposium brings together essays by a group of young Indian writers, all of whom seek to examine the future of India from the perspective of a discipline with which they are associated. There are two main reasons why this demographic and thematic combination was adopted.

First, India suffers from a number of age old problems many of which have been carefully discussed in the pages of this journal. It has, however, been less frequently pointed out that old age is among the most significant of these age old problems. By age one does not refer to biological age, though it is true that some ancient philosophers saw biological age as a precondition for wisdom and experience. It was Aristotle, after all, who famously remarked that men should not study ethics before they are thirty.

Yet, if it is true, as Oscar Wilde wrote, that 'experience is the name that men give to their mistakes' then the road to experience should emerge from individual trial and error, rather than veneration, adulation and

deification. Unfortunately, it is the latter attitude which is embedded deep within the workings of India's paternalistic society and can be evidenced not just in the continuing 'geriatrification' of our political leadership, but also in the creation and perpetuation of dynasties.

Biological theories aside, age in the context of this essay refers to a complex set of dispositions that involve, in one form or another, a sense of resignation. By contrast, one might say that Socrates was the oldest man to die young. A questioning spirit, in short, is the marker of youth. Thus, far from representing a certain demographic, the contributions in this volume should be valued because they seek to question the received wisdom.

Second, the thematic concern with the future follows from this concern with questioning the received wisdom. At present there are three different forms of thinking about the future – all of which are 'resigned' in some fashion. The first kind of thinking is at an abstract conceptual level where a dichotomy is posited between 'indigenous' and 'imposed' futures. This valuable critical project has focused its attention toward

\* This symposium is dedicated to the memory of Nishit Saran who showed us how a combination of critical thinking and powerful activism can make a difference to the lives of ordinary people.

interrogating the notion of the future, seeking – as postcolonial theory does – to detect any danger of hegemony in the concept. The resignation in this case arises from the communitarian presupposition that futures must be plural rather than cosmopolitan. The resignation that must be challenged here is the implicit notion that peoples should seek culturally unique futures, rather than participate in a universal future constructed in an egalitarian fashion.

A second form of thinking about the future is official and polite. This is the domain of vision statements, committee reports and grand initiatives that often amount to little more than pipe dreams. The emphasis is less on problem solving than saying (or appearing to say) the right things. The resignation that must be combated in this case is practical – a concerted effort is required to not just to influence the official vision, but to monitor implementation.

A third form of thinking about the future is explicitly juxtaposed against the public. In this case life carries on *despite* politics and public affairs. A seminal article by Yogendra Yadav in the late 1990s highlighted a democratic upsurge amongst the newly

‘enfranchised’ members of our polity and a simultaneous increase in apathy amongst the middle class and upper castes. Yet, the complicity of nearly every class and caste in the Gujarat riots has underscored the point (made by Yadav himself, it should be noted) that democracy is built upon a multiplicity of institutions, conventions and practices broader than electoral politics. Thus, the challenge in this case is to redirect a pervasive sense of resignation into constructive rather than violent politics.

The question then is – how is this resignation to be combated? The answer, as many writers noted after the Gujarat riot, is a pressing need to organize progressive activist forces into an alternative that can practically challenge violent politics. I shall not discuss here the nitty-gritty of this enormous challenge. The purpose of this essay is not to identify an ‘action plan’, but rather to highlight some of the intellectual challenges that are likely to emerge as a part of this effort.

Unfortunately there is a tendency for both sides – intellectuals and activists – to denigrate one another. This is unhelpful because thinking and acting are equally important in this process. However, given that

this symposium represents the former concern, the following sections of this essay respectfully argue that any activist impulse should be informed by two sets of constraints – logical and political – if it seeks to achieve progressive outcomes in the political sphere.

The first concern about logical constraints arises from the tendency amongst activists to occasionally support multiple causes without considering the relationship between the issues. To take just one example, it is possible to find individuals who are against both free trade and India's nuclear weapons programme. Now both components – protectionism and pacifism – have historic credentials that can be defended individually. But, it is not clear whether these two views cohere, or at least whether they cohere comfortably.

For example, one might ask – if we cannot trust an economically imperialistic West to align free trade with fair intentions then why should we expect them to voluntarily disarm their global ambitions? Surely the will to power that supposedly enthuses the West's economic strategy can reinvent itself as a will to dominate militarily? Perhaps the two domains are unrelated and one can argue that nuclear weapons are not a morally appropriate response to the threat of imperialism, but then the onus for explaining how we are to hold the avarice of others in check remains with the proponents of unilateral disarmament.

The second constraint is political in nature and relates to the challenge of building coalitions. Now clearly, there are some issues such as secularism where agreement about the desirable ends is readily available to reasonable persons. Here the pressing need is for concerted effort that unites theory with practice. Yet, on a number of more ambiguous and complex issues such as globalization, development, security and governance where more protracted issues are at play, it is unclear whether matters are pliable to broad criticism, i.e. 'Say NO to Economic Globalization!'

For example, in one slightly bizarre case, some public commentators have been publicly disconcerted by the fact that call centres require their employees to disguise their Indian identity. Now certainly there are numerous domains in which the market's functioning must be corrected and regulated, but it is unclear whether this is one of them. Certainly, one would hope that the market's operations do not unnecessarily undermine valued forms of culture and identity. But, if the employees of call centres choose their occupation voluntarily and in an informed manner then shouldn't the decision to make a trade-off lie in their hands? Must we bemoan a Deepti becoming a Debbi,

if Deepti would prefer to be Debbi rather than face disguised unemployment in her father's hosiery business?

There are instances then where the market aids – rather than stifles – liberty by devolving the right to make trade-offs to the individual. In other cases, however, where the potential negative social impact of individual decisions is more apparent – for example, in sowing genetically modified seeds – there might be more reason to intervene. Yet, even in *that* case there are alternatives at least worth considering, especially since some people might be more risk friendly than others. Few matters can therefore be settled outright – they require balanced analysis without which one kind of dogmatism merely confronts another.

More broadly there is a need to combat the traditional realist/idealist dichotomy that allows the 'realists' in the state to shunt aside the 'idealism' of civil society. Thus, while it is certainly the case that activist politics is underpinned by a wholly admirable sense of sympathy which drives many virtuous individuals to make enormous personal sacrifices for the benefit of other people, there is also a need to critically engage the reasons of state.

An effective civil society cannot retire from the vices of the state, nor should it subsist on a customized diet of virtuous single issue activism. In the real world there are constraints of time, virtue and capability – unbalanced budgets, unruly neighbours, powerful business houses and scheming western powers, to name a few – that cannot be wished away. And if the state cannot be supplanted because it serves to fulfil important functions ranging from defence to taxation, then civil society must be willing to criticize the system on its own terms.

For example, we might be, as an outstanding writer suggests of the Indo-Pak imbroglio, brothers separated by a family dispute. But surely one can see that this aesthetic project which makes us aware of the emotional content of a situation is quite different from the practical project associated with resolving the dispute itself. The latter, unfortunately, requires negotiations, compromises and occasionally, stand-offs. Principled stances, therefore, have to be moderated with strategic and tactical flexibility.

It does not help, in short, to answer the question 'How much butter versus how many guns?' by initiating an attack on either guns or butter. The question, regardless of how we might *justifiably* feel about the virtues of guns or butter, needs to be answered. The danger, moreover, is that if progressives fail to provide an

answer then the state will autonomously provide an answer on our behalf. Most crucially though, accepting the very real problem of 'dirty hands' does not imply that we should gleefully wade into the muck – rather, it implies that the frustrating and never-ending challenge of pragmatic dissent is to minimize the ineradicable tragedies that suffuse the modern world. Reform, rather than rejection, is the underlying sensibility.

One way into the future, therefore, lies in escaping the binary formed by the resigned grey eminences and their quixotic opponents. It is an awareness of the constraints that stymie political activity – rather than the ability to witness mirages – that would guide any subsequent activism. This, in turn, might serve as a constructive step toward discovering the niches that young women and men can populate in the hope of making small but sensible contributions to debate on public issues.

In this vein the first essay in this issue considers a feature of public life hastily dismissed by commentators. Defying the prevailing disregard for the 'ramblings' of our politicians, Rochana Bajpai draws attention to the manner in which the mundane and coarse exterior of political rhetoric might conceal tremendous variations, not just in what politicians say but in what we take them to mean over the course of normative debates. There is much, she suggests, that could be gained by pinning down these variations in an effort to master the effects they have on political events.

The second essay in this collection draws on the anthropological works of one of India's finest writers in order to consider what role an exploratory photographer might play in commenting upon the normative absurdities that dominate the political landscape. Tracing the evolution of such photography in the Indian context, Karna Basu argues that the persuasive power of photographs can be harnessed into a form that encourages collective introspection and fights the 'prevailing wisdoms' of the time.

The essay by Arunabha Ghosh reconsiders the dilemma that has paralyzed Indian foreign policy since independence. Evaluating the schizophrenic nature of India's foreign policy, he suggests we cannot know our interests until we know who 'we' are and what we stand for. Toward this end, he counsels that India reaffirm those features of its identity that can engender *vishwajananat*, or universal acceptability and applicability.

The fourth essay by Ashley Tellis starkly depicts the future of sexualities in modern India. Surveying the

depressing landscape, he draws our attention to the intractable part played by violence, tradition and taboo in constraining sexuality. The future, he finds, offers little hope if we cannot unencumber ourselves of the ossified categories and discourses heaped upon the subject of sexuality.

The essay by Bodhisattva Kar focuses on the complicity of the historical discipline and the nation state in affecting a closure of the critical domain. It is, he argues, only through a critical recognition of the complex interplay between the social sources and modes of professional authority that an effective move beyond the present-day Indian historiography can begin.

The sixth essay by Arvind Narrain seeks to document the tortuous process through which 'queer people' have gained minimal legal recognition. He emphasises that these basic human rights have had to be won through practice and exercised amidst great danger. The privileges of an Indian citizenship, he suggests, remain tied to an archaic notion of heterosexuality that darkens the horizon for those forsaken by this criteria.

The final essay by Ritambhara Hebbar traces the uncertain transition of the tribal rights movement from resistance to governance in Jharkhand. She finds the tribal community divided by the continuing debate over the exasperating binary of integration or isolation, which neither responds to changes in the Jharkhandi identity over time, nor focuses attention on the substantive issues of governance.

In sum, the contributions to this symposium intend to provide a sampling of the constructive debates being wrought by young writers who seek to challenge conventional wisdom in Indian society. And even though many contributors will not agree with the proposals outlined in this essay, they all nevertheless seek to offer their own proposals regarding the direction an informed activism should consider.

There is an open invitation to participate by responding to these essays or by proposing further alternatives. Further editions of this project are planned and young writers from around the country are encouraged to contribute – there are no constraints on either topic or content. The only requirement is to engage oneself critically and constructively because the essence of an independent mind, as Christopher Hitchens writes in *Letters to a Young Contrarian*, lies not in *what* it thinks but in *how* it thinks.

RAHUL SAGAR

# Values in political rhetoric

ROCHANA BAJPAI

WHO has not experienced tedium at the mention of ideals in political speeches? As soon as we hear a politician appeal to secularism or democracy or social justice, our eyes start to glaze over, our ears cease to pay attention to what is being said. Nor is this reaction restricted to the public audience to which that political rhetoric is primarily directed.

Until recently, the dominant approaches in academic scholarship too had by and large eschewed any sustained inquiry into the values commonly espoused in political rhetoric. While the writings and pronouncements of exemplary figures such as Gandhi or Nehru had been the subject of influential scholarly works, the values expressed in everyday political discourse—parliamentary utterances, politicians' pronouncements on policies and events—had remained marginal to the concerns of political analysts.

In recent years, a marked shift is discernable in this regard as scholars from a variety of standpoints have begun to pay closer attention to the ideals that constitute the staple fare of political discourse. In particular, a rich and growing body of literature on Hindu nationalism, secularism, democracy, multiculturalism and liberalism has greatly enhanced our understanding of the founding ideals of the Indian state.<sup>1</sup> However, while the import of these studies for particu-

lar areas of scholarship has been acknowledged, their cumulative significance in reorienting our attention to ideals in politics has only been tenuously grasped. This essay seeks to underscore the salience of this scholarly turn for a study of the values espoused in political rhetoric. It also argues that further investigation into the structure of concepts and ideals, in particular political debates, is needed in order to arrive at a more precise grasp of the nature and the role of values in political life.<sup>2</sup>

This essay is divided into three sections. The first looks at some possible reasons why values in political rhetoric have conventionally been neglected. The second section outlines a few considerations in favour of a close analysis of such values. Finally, I suggest areas in which our understanding of politics can benefit from an analytical reconstruction of concepts and norms in political debates.

Why, then, have values in political rhetoric largely been ignored?

*Hindu Nationalism in Modern India* (Delhi, 1999); Neera Chandhoke, *Beyond Secularism: The Rights of Religious Minorities* (Delhi, 1999); Niraja Gopal Jayal, *Democracy and the State: Welfare, Secularism, and Development in Contemporary India* (Delhi, 1999); Christophe Jaffrelot, *The Hindu Nationalist Movement and Indian Politics: 1925 to the 1990s* (London, 1996); Sunil Khilnani, *The Idea of India* (London, 1997); and Gurpreet Mahajan, *Identities and Rights: Aspects of Liberal Democracy in India* (Delhi, 1998)). On political discourse more generally, see for instance the writings of Upendra Baxi, Partha Chatterjee, Sudipto Kaviraj, Bhikhu Parekh and Thomas Pantham.

2. For an analysis of arguments in political debates, see for instance Jayal, *Democracy and the State*; also Zoya Hasan, 'Minority Identity, Muslim Women Bill Campaign and the Political Process', *Economic and Political Weekly*,

\* I am grateful to Nandini Gooptu and Prashant Kidambi for comments.

1. For some key works in this regard see, for instance, Rajeev Bhargava (ed.), *Secularism and its Critics* (Delhi, 1998); Thomas Blom Hansen, *The Saffron Wave, Democracy and*

Several factors appear to be at work here. At the most general level, there is the sheer monotony of political speech. The routine and repetitive incantation of ideals of democracy, secularism and social justice in political debate induces a sense of ennui. Because we have heard these terms so many times before, we assume that we know what they are. Their meanings appear to be both obvious and commonplace. As such, there doesn't seem to be anything further for analysis to unearth.

**T**he values found in political debate also fall foul of the main disciplinary approaches to politics. On the one hand, political theorists whose primary concern is with concepts and norms have not been interested in those espoused in political rhetoric. There may be several reasons for this. Normative political theorists have been largely preoccupied with constructing theories that stipulate, for instance, what principles of democracy or justice ideally require. The analysis of real-world political practice is not necessarily relevant to this task.

Even if this is accepted, as it is by many political theorists, that knowledge about actual political practices can aid theoretical advance, for instance by illuminating unexamined assumptions in a theory, it is not immediately apparent how an investigation of the principles professed in politics can contribute towards this. And the fact that the values espoused in political debate are often muddled and indeterminate, designated incorrectly, and deployed in logically inconsistent ways with little regard for clarity or

precision in usage, might discourage potential theoretical interest.<sup>3</sup>

Not only have values in political rhetoric traditionally been disregarded by the political theorist, they have equally been ignored by historians and social scientists concerned with explaining political outcomes. The values professed by politicians have conventionally been regarded as little more than tools of political expediency, as smokescreens for more 'real' interests that determine political outcomes, such as political bargaining and material interests.

Politicians, it is felt, tailor principles at will in order to fit their aims of the moment. As such, the values professed in political life have no causal efficacy and are superfluous to explanations of political outcomes.<sup>4</sup> And while there have been studies that have affirmed the explanatory role of values in politics, a detailed examination of these values is not usually regarded as germane to our understanding of political outcomes.

**W**hy then should we bother with the principles professed by politicians? While I have sketched some possible reasons for the neglect of values in political rhetoric, my discussion has so far implicitly assumed that these values do in fact merit close attention. In the remainder of this essay, I shall try and outline some reasons in support of this view, drawing upon recent scholarship and using some examples from my research. In brief, I will argue that some of the con-

siderations cited above against an analysis of values in political rhetoric are mistaken, and that while others are manifestly true—for instance, that the ideals invoked by politicians in defense of their positions are often ill-defined or insincerely held—it does not follow from this that an analysis of these values is redundant. Our understanding of politics can benefit considerably both from taking the values professed therein seriously, and from a detailed analytical reconstruction of norms in political debates.

**L**et us first consider the entrenched view that the values espoused in political rhetoric are irrelevant for our explanations of political outcomes. This view has been contested in several writings that have broadly affirmed the role of political discourse in shaping political action. In his account of why our explanations of politics must take seriously the principles espoused by political actors, Quentin Skinner is instructive on the question of exactly how professed principles condition the possibilities for political action. He argues that it does not follow from the fact that political actors are not usually sincerely motivated by the principles they profess, that principles play no causal role in politics.

In other words, the role of values in politics is not limited to the intentions of politicians in invoking such values. Even if the values proclaimed by a politician are a complete sham, in that there is not an iota of genuine belief invested in them, and the agent's intentions in invoking principles are purely instrumental—to provide a cover, to lend spurious weight, to make conduct appear rational and right—professed principles may still play a role in determining his conduct.

For a rational agent claiming that 'his apparently untoward actions

3. For an engaging discussion of this point, see Adam Swift, 'Politics v. Philosophy', *Prospect*, August-September 2001.

4. This is the basis for Quentin Skinner's famous critique. See in particular his 'Some Problems in the Analysis of Political Thought and Action', and 'Language and Social Change' in J. Tully (ed.), *Meaning and Context: Quentin Skinner and his Critics* (Princeton, 1988).

24(1), 7 January 1989; Zakia Pathak and Rajeswari Sundararajan, 'Shah Bano', *Signs* 14(3), 1989; Meena Dhandha, 'Justifications for Gender Quotas in Legislative Bodies: A Consideration of Identity and Representation', *Women's Philosophy Review*, No. 20, Winter 1998-99.

were in fact motivated by some accepted set of social or political principles' will be 'obliged to behave in such a way that his actions remain compatible with the claim that these principles genuinely motivated him.'

In other words, 'a principle that helps legitimate a course of action must also be amongst the enabling conditions of its occurrence', conversely, 'an action is inhibited from occurring if it cannot be legitimated.' The further point here, contrary to the common view that politicians freely tailor principles to fit their projects, is that individual agents cannot manipulate the norms they use to legitimate their conduct wholly according to their will, for the availability and applicability of these norms is limited by their prevailing usage.

**W**hile politicians will undoubtedly seek to stretch the meaning of existing principles to cover the action they wish to legitimate, they are not unhindered in doing so, for if in the process of extension these principles become unrecognizable, they will no longer serve the purpose of legitimation. As Skinner puts it '...[an agent] cannot hope to stretch the application of the existing principles indefinitely; correspondingly, he can only hope to legitimate a restricted range of actions.'<sup>5</sup>

While politicians will try and mould principles in order to fit their projects, they also have to tailor their projects 'in order to make them answer to the pre-existing language of moral principles.' The prevailing normative vocabulary, thus, in part determines the range of actions open to an agent. Therefore, 'to recover the nature of the

normative vocabulary available to an agent for the description and appraisal of his conduct is at the same time to indicate one of the constraints on his conduct itself.'<sup>6</sup>

**W**e see then that one of the reasons why the values espoused by politicians merit attention is because they constitute a key determinant of political action. Let us now consider the notion that any detailed examination of values in political debate is pointless because we already know what these are. Such views rest variously on assumptions that the meanings of values in political discourse are self-evident, simple, and that there is a single generally accepted sense in which these are being invoked.

Each of these assumptions is questionable. We do commonly witness the recurrence of the same set of normative terms in political debate. The repeated incantations of national unity, secularism or democracy in political discourse do create the impression that these values are being invoked in an obvious sense. Closer examination reveals, however, that the familiarity of political rhetoric is deceptive. In political discourse, seemingly simple and similar sounding appeals to secularism or national unity often obscure a complex structure of concepts.

Consider, for instance the case of national unity, one of the values most frequently bandied about in political discourse. What does an appeal to national unity refer to? To the political integrity of the country? To the stability of the state and the maintenance of civil peace? To social solidarity and cohesion between different social groups? To a sense of belonging to the nation? To national identity?

To some combination of these?<sup>7</sup> While it might appear at first sight that the meaning of national unity is straightforward and apparent, the term has had several related but distinct referents in political debate. And if we focus for the moment on one referent of the term, national identity, it is soon clear that there have been different conceptions of national identity in political discourse—from a definition of national identity in terms of secular democratic citizenship, to ethno-cultural characterizations of nationality in terms of belonging to a common Hindu civilization and culture.

**T**he multiplicity of referents and conceptions of national unity implies that a political assertion that 'Policy X undermines national unity' might serve as shorthand for several different claims. It also implies that two political pronouncements that look similar might in fact embody very different arguments. For instance, special representation rights for minorities might be opposed on grounds of national unity, but for very different reasons: in one case because they are thought to undermine the construction of a national identity based on the principle that a person's religion or caste is irrelevant in the political sphere, and in another case, because such rights are thought to represent a threat to the idea that all Indians share a common cultural identity.

Nor is national unity unique in this regard. Take the case of another political ideal, secularism. In political discourse, it has referred for instance, to a secular state, to a secular society, to secular attitudes and identities, and to the process of secularization. If

5. Skinner, 'Some Problems in the Analysis of Political Thought and Action', pp. 116-117. I have discussed this argument in greater detail in my M.Phil thesis, 'Recognizing Minorities: Some Aspects of the Indian Constituent Assembly Debates, 1946-1949', Faculty of Social Studies, University of Oxford, 1997.

6. Skinner, 'Language and Social Change', p. 132.

7. For further discussion, see Rochana Bajpai, 'Minority Rights in the Constituent Assembly Debates, 1946-1950', No.30, *QEH Working Paper Series* (No. 30, 1999), University of Oxford.



we focus on the concept of a secular state, we find several conceptions in political discourse. Among others, a secular state has connoted disestablishment or the absence of an official state religion, it has been taken to imply state impartiality between religions or non-sectarianism, and it has been identified with the privatization of religion. Underpinning each of these conceptions in turn is a range of norms: for instance, while in some cases secularism as state impartiality between religions might be regarded as desirable primarily for the sake of equal rights for all individuals, in other instances, it could be favoured mainly for reasons of religious freedom for groups.<sup>8</sup>

**W**e see then that the mundane and coarse exterior of political rhetoric might conceal multiple and intricate conceptions and subtle normative claims. Now in political usage, several different arguments are frequently run together, distinct concepts are conflated with each other and the precise conception of a concept being invoked in a particular instance is rarely specified. Indeed, the nebulousness of values and arguments in political rhetoric is partly deliberate, an occupational necessity of politics, as it were. Politicians often choose to collapse distinct arguments and to adopt open-ended appeals to values in order, for instance, to reach out to disparate constituencies, to reconcile discordant positions, or to maximize their room for manoeuvre.<sup>9</sup>

8. On the values underpinning secularism, see Bhargava, 'What is Secularism For?' in his *Secularism and its Critics*. For a discussion of the distinction between the ideology of secularism and the process of secularization, see for instance, Mahajan, *Identities and Rights*.

9. On this point, see Michael Freeden, *Ideologies and Political Theory: A Conceptual Approach* (Oxford, 1996), and Swift, 'Politics v. Philosophy'.

As political analysts seeking to come to grips with what the values professed in politics are, however, it is incumbent upon us to probe underneath the surface of political rhetoric. We need to 'reconstruct and amplify' the underlying concepts and norms, and to disentangle and pursue the implications of the distinct arguments that are deployed in political debate.<sup>10</sup>

**W**hat are the areas in which our understanding of politics can benefit from a detailed analysis of the values espoused in political debates? In this concluding section, I offer some examples in support of the case I have outlined during the course of this essay.

Our evaluations of political life commonly rely on our understanding of what the public norms of Indian politics have in fact been. Thus, for instance, secularism is frequently adjudged as having failed because the conception of secularism adopted at the time of independence was unsuitable to Indian conditions, or because those in charge of the Indian state have departed from the ideals of the Constitution-makers. In the absence of a sufficiently precise grasp of these ideals, however, our appraisals tend to remain broad and diffuse.

In a claim in a given instance that there has been a departure from constitutional secularism, what exactly does this lapse consist of? Does it lie in a failure to protect the basic rights of individuals belonging to minority groups that violates a key value underpinning constitutional secularism, that of equal citizenship? In appeals to religion in political mobilization that contravene the constitutional ideal of the exclusion of religion from

10. Freeden, *Ideologies and Political Theory*, p. 34.

the political domain? In the Indian state abandoning its formative quest to create a national identity that did not base itself on any ethno-cultural attributes?

Our appraisals frequently end up moving between the many distinct strands and connotations of secularism at play in political discourse, and between different criteria of what it is to be secular. So one benefit to be gained from an inquiry into the deep structure of concepts and norms in particular political debates is a better grasp of the discursive continuities and shifts in the careers of the founding ideals of the Indian state and more precise assessments of their successes and failures.

**S**Second, a detailed analysis of values espoused in political debate can help clarify the nature of political disagreement, of what it is that divides opposing sides on an issue. Do the disputants on a particular policy disagree about the relevant values are? Or do they agree about values, but advance very different interpretations of these? In the Shah Bano debate for instance, both sides on the Muslim Women's Bill took a stand on secularism, but while those advocating the bill defined secularism primarily in terms of religious freedom for groups, those opposing the bill characterised secularism in terms of equal rights for all individuals. It might also of course be the case that opposing sides on an issue share the same conception of an ideal, but construe its practical policy requirements differently. A reconstruction of underlying concepts and norms enables us to grasp what exactly is at issue between competing political proposals and thus places us in a better position to choose between them.

Finally, I want to return to one of the points discussed earlier, namely

the significance of the values professed by politicians for our accounts of political outcomes. One example from Indian politics that illustrates the importance of the normative vocabulary of political debate for our explanations of political outcomes is the case of safeguards for religious minorities during constitution making.<sup>11</sup> Religious minorities had been the chief beneficiaries of policies of minority 'safeguards' comprising reserved seats in legislatures and executives, and quotas in government employment during the colonial period, and along with the so called 'backward sections', were included within the purview of safeguards in early constitutional drafts. By the time of the final draft of the Indian Constitution, however, safeguards for religious minorities were dropped.

**T**his remarkable development has curiously received little scholarly attention.<sup>12</sup> It is generally assumed that the partition of the country provides an obvious and sufficient explanation for why safeguards for religious minorities came to be withdrawn during constitution making. Partition, it is

11. This argument is developed in greater detail in my M.Phil thesis (1997). See also Bajpai, published as 'Minority Rights in the Constituent Assembly Debates, 1946-1950', and Rochana Bajpai, 'Constituent Assembly Debates and Minority Rights', *Economic and Political Weekly* 25(21-22), 27 May 2000.

12. For notable exceptions, For an early exception, see Ralph Retzlaff, 'The Problem of Communal Minorities in the Drafting of the Indian Constitution', in R.N. Spann (ed.), *Constitutionalism in Asia* (Bombay, 1963). For recent writings on the Constituent Assembly Debates, see Iqbal Ansari, 'Minorities and the Politics of Constitution Making in India', in D.L. Sheth and G. Mahajan (eds.), *Minority Identities and the Nation State* (Delhi, 1999); James Chiriyankandath, 'Constitutional Predilections', *Seminar* (No. 484, December 1999) and Shefali Jha, 'Secularism in the Constituent Assembly Debates, 1946-1950', *Economic and Political Weekly* 37(30), 27 July 2002.

argued, hardened opinion within the Indian National Congress against minority claims. Moreover, after partition, the Congress no longer had to conciliate a powerful Muslim League. Further, the main political parties pressing for safeguards for religious minorities, the Muslim League and the Sikh Panthic Party, were in disarray and could not present a united front of resistance against the revocation of safeguards. As such, the Congress had few real checks in the way of pushing through its agenda.

**N**ow while partition and the change of circumstance it produced are undoubtedly crucial for our understanding of why safeguards for religious minorities came to be retracted during constitution making, they do not in my view constitute a sufficient explanation of this outcome. Consider this: While the Congress was overwhelmingly preponderant in the Assembly after partition, this was also a time when the foundations of the new Indian nation state were being laid and the Congress was being called upon to make good its claim that it was not just a Hindu party, but represented all sections of the Indian nation.

The Congress could hardly afford to be seen as simply using its brute majority to steamroller a narrow partisan or sectional agenda on a question that had for so long and so bitterly divided Indians. Indeed, it is important to recall how close the Constituent Assembly did in fact come to adopting safeguards for religious minorities: these were first accepted for inclusion in the Constitution *after* partition and would remain in the Draft Constitution until 1949, when they were abolished through a narrow vote in the advisory committee.

I would like to suggest that one critical condition that enabled the Congress effect this radical policy

change was the availability of a normative vocabulary in which safeguards for religious minorities were illegitimate. My analysis of the Constituent Assembly debates suggests that the central concepts of the nationalist legitimating vocabulary, those of secularism, democracy, rights, justice and national unity, were construed as precluding safeguards for minority groups as a matter of general policy. In nationalist opinion, safeguards were regarded as legitimate only for a temporary period and for a specific purpose, that of ameliorating the social and economic disabilities of the 'backward classes'. There was no principled defence in the nationalist vocabulary for safeguards in the case of religious minorities.

**T**his marked a crucial shift from the colonial framework where the entitlement of minority groups to special representation and other forms of safeguards had been an established principle. The illegitimacy of safeguards for religious minorities within a broadly shared normative vocabulary was a crucial factor that facilitated their abolition during constitution making.

To conclude, this essay has sketched some reasons for paying closer attention to the values professed by politicians, and for why a detailed analytical reconstruction of the underlying structure of concepts and norms in political debates is fruitful. These reflections are not intended to be exhaustive, and more work is needed to order and develop the arguments outlined here. The broad aims of this exercise are to contribute to ongoing scholarly discussions across the sub-disciplines of normative political theory and empirical political science, and to suggest that Indian political debates, where the fundamental ideals of the polity are being disputed, constitute an important field for this kind of an inquiry.

# A shot in time

KARNA BASU

IT is undeniable that photography bears a unique burden – that of accurate representation – separating it from the other arts. One of the first issues Susan Sontag tackles in her seminal treatise *On Photography* is ‘the presumption of veracity that gives all photographs authority, interest, seductiveness.’

This burden of veracity weighs more in India than elsewhere and in particular the developed countries. It stems from India’s crushing poverty and, more recently, unpalatable communal violence. A photographer in India cannot, with any degree of comfort, altogether ignore the country he lives in. And this is partly due to the flexibility of the medium itself – the fact that photography facilitates rich relationships between artist and environment and between environment and audience.

Interestingly, photography shares an important similarity with the

saffron brigade – both thrive on diversity. But unlike the saffron brigade, which derives its sustenance from combating India’s diversity, when a photographer shoots the unfamiliar it is an act of embrace. A photograph finds elements of interest in the most mundane. It can extract heterogeneity even when it seems there is none available. This is particularly true of art photography – work that, if commercial or journalistic, is not primarily so. There is, therefore, an urgent need for it to enter the Indian mainstream.

Traditionally, many among the steady stream of western photographers tackling India have fallen into the tempting trap of simplistic summarizing rather than incisive exploration. When the Swiss photographer Robert Frank published *The Americans* in 1959, he was commended (and derided) for, among other reasons, suggesting that a collection of photographs could somehow encompass

the essence of a country as varied as the United States. Similar spreads on India do not generate these reactions.

There is a plethora of photography books with the simple but arrogant title 'India', in which the country (and sometimes the subcontinent) is simplified into a 'sea of smiling faces' or something of the sort. But Ayodhya is not Ahmedabad, and Kashmir is not Kerala. Bengali legend has it that when Alexander arrived in India through the Himalayas, he scanned the entire country with a sweep of his eyes and exclaimed, '*Satya, Seleucus, ki bichitra ei desh!* (Honestly, Seleucus, how diverse this country is!)' If Alexander's eyesight is to be trusted, careful studies along geographic and thematic lines must precede 'definitive' works on India.

On the other hand, the *Indian* approach to India (through photography and film) has frequently rested on escapist fantasy rather than a confrontation with reality. This in itself does not contradict the goals of art. Take, as an illustration, the studio photographs by Seydou Keita, the Malian photographer. A quiet unassuming man, he refused to philosophize about his work, insisting that his goal was simply to make his clients look their best. Yet his beautiful photographs are full of empathy and infuse the fantasies of the photographed with great dignity. This tradition of studio photography (and similarly, Bollywood cinema) is only natural in countries like Mali and India, where people need a diversion from the struggle of their daily lives.

But such an atmosphere can stifle alternate approaches to the arts – those that might fulfil other social functions. Susan Sontag writes of China: 'The only use the Chinese are allowed to make of their history is didactic: their interest in history is narrow, moralis-

tic, deforming, uncurious.' While in China the government creates the obstacles to art, in India it is the gigantic, influential and homogenous popular culture that does the same.

The relative paucity of audience interest, however, has not prevented contemporary Indian photographers from creating a formidable, if small, body of work. Since the camera is a recent European innovation, it is only natural that these photographers should be partly influenced by the Europeans who first brought the camera to India. Three photographers from the second half of the 19th century stand out as being particularly instrumental to the growth of the field in India – Felice Beato, Samuel Bourne and Donald Macfarlane.

Felice Beato was one of the world's first 'war photographers'. While most contemporary war photographers are anti-war, Beato was quite the opposite. One of his best known photographs, made in 1858, is entitled 'Interior of the Secundra Bagh after the Slaughter of the 2,000 Rebels by the 93rd Highlanders and 4th Punjab Regiment. First attack of Sir Colin Campbell in November 1857, Lucknow.' For this set-up photograph, Beato brought in human skeletons and scattered them across the courtyard in front of the bullet-ridden walls. To add to the air of English glory, he threw in a few defeated looking Indian men standing languidly in the background. In his essay on Beato, David Harris asks, 'How does one reconcile the serenity and order of this image with the graphic and repellent descriptions of four hours of continuous slaughter...?' Perhaps this is not possible, and one can only hope that civilizational progress renders some artistic legacies dead (or, in our case, modified into the more benign culture of escapist studio photography).

Macfarlane and Bourne mark the advent of street photography in India. The photography historian Jane Ricketts writes that Macfarlane wanted to '[discover] his personal vision of the picturesque in the superficially uninteresting surroundings of Calcutta.' Indeed, his brilliant abstraction in 'Rocks, Darjeeling' and his depiction of neglected beauty in 'Tolly's Nullah, Calcutta' are refreshingly democratic and free of colonial hang-ups, reminiscent of Eugene Atget's serene Paris streetscapes from the late 19th century. Bourne too had a fine eye for composition and was quite taken by India's natural beauty. A master of understatement, he went so far as to declare that the Ganga was a 'not altogether unpicturesque object.'

It took one more European to significantly influence modern Indian photography – the Belgian master, Henri Cartier-Bresson, who made the first of his several trips to India just after independence. He coined the term 'decisive moment', an approach to street photography that would inspire generations of photographers across the world. Satyajit Ray described him as 'the greatest photographer of our time' and attributed to him 'the skill and vision that raise the ordinary and the ephemeral to a monumental level...' Cartier-Bresson achieved even greater brilliance when photographing events that were themselves monumental – the aftermath of partition and the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi. There is the photograph of Nehru standing perched on the gates of Birla House, announcing to the anxious crowd that Mahatma Gandhi is indeed dead. A diffused light falls on Nehru's face. The picture is slightly shaky. Completely unprepared for this event, Cartier-Bresson has tried to steady his camera by placing it on what looks like the roof of a car.

And in another photograph, we have Nehru in an altogether different mood. Standing between Edwina and Lord Mountbatten, he is doubling over with laughter, his eyes on Edwina. The photograph is erotica at its finest and most unexpected. I remember a scene from the documentary *Three Women and a Camera*, in which the photographer Homai Vyarawalla complains that she doesn't like this photograph; it is undignified. That it may be, but we should thank Cartier-Bresson for allowing our prime minister's undignified doings to be fair game for a photographer. More importantly, the image of Cartier-Bresson roaming the streets of India, searching for the decisive moment in the cities and villages, capturing the tragic optimism of independence, is an affirmation for the compatibility of photojournalism, art, and high emotion in one package.

**I**n a country where so much meets the eye, the early practitioners of Indian art photography (working from the '60s into the '90s) readily took up where the Europeans left off, but this time tackling the 'street' on their own, in more personal terms. It is only very recently that a new trend towards abstraction and introspection has emerged. Though it is difficult to make a comprehensive list of prominent names from the last 40-odd years, some that come to mind are Sheba Chhachi, Nemai Ghosh, Sunil Gupta, Sunil Janah, Samar Jodha, Swapan Parekh, Ram Rahman, Raghu Rai, Sanjeev Saith, Dayanita Singh, Pamela Singh, Raghubir Singh and Homai Vyarawalla. Of these, three who are sure to leave behind strong artistic legacies are Raghu Rai, Dayanita Singh and Raghubir Singh. Not only are they extremely talented photographers, but their intimacy with the western art world will ensure that their work

lives on in numerous well-produced books.

**I** have heard stories from shopkeepers on Delhi's Chandni Chowk about a photographer who is regularly amongst them – sipping tea, making friends, and taking pictures. I like to believe it is Raghu Rai they are talking about. Rai is a member of Magnum, the most prominent photojournalistic agency in the world (co-founded by Cartier-Bresson and famous for war photographers like Robert Capa and, more recently, James Nachtwey and Gilles Peress). A large part of Rai's work is in black and white and, more than any other Indian, he has made an art out of photo journalism. His black and white pictures, which I think are his best, are grainy, full of contrast, and often dark. By doing away with the colour that is so integral to Indian life, he ends up with sad and surreal landscapes.

He has written, 'People say that a good picture is worth a thousand words; I feel at times, a thousand words are a lot of noise, how about capturing some silence?' This silence is palpable in his 1965 photograph 'Outskirts of Delhi', shot at dawn, which resembles a sprawling Japanese Zen garden with cows. Rai has extensively photographed old Delhi in all its faded splendour and has also completed portrait projects of both Mother Teresa and Indira Gandhi.

Dayanita Singh has taken documentary photography out of the street and into homes and communities. She had the courage (some say audacity) to photograph her upper-middle class relatives and friends sitting smugly in their drawing rooms and looking jadedly into the camera. Her photographs insist that the upper-middle class belong to India as much as anyone else, and as if to strengthen this claim, she has also built moving photo-

graphic collections of *hijras* and prostitutes. Her most recent book, *Myself Mona Ahmed*, comprises portraits of Mona Ahmed, a eunuch, spanning several years of her life. By photographing different classes of people separately and empathetically, Singh effectively highlights the unpleasant social demarcations that plague India today.

Raghubir Singh, until his premature death in 1998, was a prolific street photographer. He was a professed fan of Cartier-Bresson, but openly defied him by using colour. In Singh's opinion, 'Unlike those in the West, Indians have always intuitively seen and controlled colour... The fundamental condition of the West is one of guilt, linked to death – from which black is inseparable. Psychological empathy with black is alien to India.' This may be an overstatement, but Singh's photographs are unmistakably buoyed by colour. His 1994 photograph, 'Crawford Market, Mumbai' displays his mastery over the decisive moment – a chaotic colourful marketplace, five straw baskets balanced on five heads perfectly captured in mid-motion, one man drinking water from a kettle, and another pouring tea into a cup (this photograph bears a striking resemblance to a 1966 shot of Jaipur by Cartier-Bresson, and I suspect this may be Singh's private homage to him).

**E**lsewhere, Singh's mastery over colour is useful in demonstrating the lack of it, for example, in a shot of a corpulent middle-aged man in a dreary Bombay Dyeing office. One characteristic of Singh's photography that sets him apart (for better or worse) is his framing. The borders of his photographs deliberately leave the viewer unsettled. Arms are cut off, necks sliced, and legs broken. Singh refuses to submit to the simple pleasures of

clean geometric framing and uncluttered straight lines.

Of the more introspective photographers, I feel it is instructive to mention Sunil Gupta. The London-based photographer has addressed homosexuality in India through several collections of photographs. One of his early series, *Exiles*, contains portraits in quotidian urban settings that potently depict the resounding clash between homosexuality and the Indian mainstream. His later series are more abstract and incorporate montage and multiple exposures. His work indicates an interesting shift in approach from the methods of street/portrait photography to more private musings through abstraction. While doing so, however, Gupta avoids the trap of self-pity, and his sociological observations are all the stronger for it.

John Szarkowski, a well-known photographer and art theorist, writes of 'a fundamental dichotomy in contemporary photography between those who think of photography as a means of self-expression and those who think of it as a method of exploration.' A cruder way to put it would be to separate photography into 'introspective' and 'street'. Szarkowski himself admits that the boundaries of these categories are blurry and there is definite overlap. However, this distinction is useful, especially in the context of the maturing and diversifying of photography in India, as it allows us to ascribe to each school a set of goals and benchmarks for evaluation.

**T**he task that the exploratory photographer sets for himself (rather, *should* set for himself) is not unlike that of the anthropologist. In a personal/anthropological essay about the Marxists of Bengal, Ramachandra Guha describes the three 'births' of an anthropologist, an idea he attributes to M. N. Srinivas. A 'once-born' anthropologist is eager

to learn about a tribe but is as yet unaccustomed to its ways. A 'twice-born' anthropologist is one who has immersed herself in the ways of the tribe she is studying – she sees from its point of view and is loyal to its members. And an anthropologist is 'thrice-born' when she is back in the university, ready to dissect what she has learned with an academic but sensitive eye. At the end of this three-tiered approach, 'the allegiance to one's tribe can never be entirely abandoned, but now one can at least hope to achieve partial objectivity: the mark of a scholar, as distinct from a partisan.'

**S**uch an approach to exploratory, or street, photography will help the photographer to bypass an ethical dilemma about partisanship discussed by Sontag: 'The history of photography discloses a long tradition of ambivalence about its capacity for partisanship: the taking of sides is felt to undermine its perennial assumption that all subjects have validity and interest.' Guha's approach successfully separates the notions of partisanship and empathy.

Szarkowski cites Alfred Stieglitz as the model for the introspective photographer, but Stieglitz's approach to photography was arguably more over-arching. Stieglitz, in the early 20th century, almost single-handedly brought about a revolution in America's perception of photography. He argued eloquently for photography's role as a vehicle of social change and campaigned for an appreciation of its unique aesthetic potential. His enthusiasm for '*equivalents*' is part of the reason Szarkowski names him as a father of modern introspective photography. An *equivalent*, in Stieglitz's words, is a photograph that evokes feelings 'about something other than the subject of the photograph.' Szarkowski adds that an equivalent

is 'fundamentally romantic... and profoundly self-centred.' Stieglitz's defining characteristic, however, was his obsessive quest for beauty, which he even imparted to students like Dorothy Norman (best known in India for her delicate portraits of Jawaharlal Nehru and Indira Gandhi).

Guha and Stieglitz help us to establish certain ideals – the first for the exploratory photographer and the second for art photographers in general. Against this backdrop, we can look at the specifics of photography in the Indian environment. Both Raghubir Singh and Raghu Rai have written about the practice of photography in India. While their photographs betray their divergent approaches to street photography, it is also instructive to look at their writing.

**R**aghubir Singh has unambiguously stated his desire to celebrate the good in India, by highlighting what separates it from the West. To him, 'Beauty, nature, humanism, and spirituality are the four cornerstones of the continuous culture of India.' He writes about his travels across India with the American photographer Lee Friedlander who 'was often looking for the abject as subject.' Singh argues that Friedlander's approach of 'beauty as seen in abjection' is fundamentally western and suits neither him nor India.

Raghu Rai, on the other hand, embraces black and white and is willing to paint a considerably grittier picture of India. While most pictures in Singh's book on Calcutta, for example, are loud and boisterous, the inhabitants of Rai's equivalent book frequently look forlorn.

Rai has written on the need for artistry and honesty in both art photography and photojournalism. Like many photojournalists, he asserts that the notion of authorship is out of place in photography: '...when I am told that

people can distinguish my work from others, it is not very good, because it means I have imposed myself on the pictures so that traces of *me* can be seen.' On this topic, Susan Sontag writes, 'Insofar as photography is (or should be) about the world, the photographer counts for little, but insofar as it is the instrument of intrepid, questioning, subjectivity, the photographer is all.' This is an apt observation.

**T**he simple fact of Singh's rejection of black and white and Rai's successful adoption of it asserts *some* notion of authorship. This is not at odds with Rai's concern for honesty, because honesty can accommodate subjectivity. So if we are to acknowledge that the photographer must leave a mark on her photographs, we must simultaneously reject Raghubir Singh's claim that colour is *better* suited to the Indian psyche. It is the photographer's psyche that counts. Colour could perhaps be defended on aesthetic grounds, but cannot on psychological grounds. Singh's criticisms of both Friedlander and black and white are unconvincing because he focuses more on a photographer's inclinations and the final product rather than on the sincerity of the process.

Raghubir Singh was, however, correct to caution the Indian photographer against blindly aping the standards of the West. In particular, he said that India is not ready for the individualistic introspection that is the trademark of post-modern art. But this still leaves room for a *collective* introspection through art, a dose of which the country sorely needs. A photographer should operate with the freedom to be pessimistic, the freedom to obsess over the unpleasant and the inhumane. Such an obsession does not indicate an aesthetic compromise.

Sebastiao Salgado, the economist-turned-photographer, has spent

a lifetime photographing the world's poor and dispossessed with an unflinching eye. His photographs are proof that one can beautify sadness without glorifying it, that a photograph can be delectable yet damning. The journalist P. Sainath, who doesn't consider himself a photographer but is in fact a rather good one, takes pictures that also achieve this duality.

Needless to say, the language of photography is accessible to the literate and illiterate alike. While a painting frequently loses its impact when reproduced on a page, much less is lost in a good reproduction of a photograph. So a photograph's sphere of influence is potentially enormous. I am sure that the photograph of Govinda in a Rupa 'Frontline' vest, asserting '*Yeh aram ka mamla hai*' has inspired many a man to sprint to the nearest *banyan* store (myself included). To say that photographs are not capable of inducing change in society would be to confuse photography with lack of publicity.

Raghu Rai, for instance, has lamented the reluctance of popular publications to print controversial photographs (this problem is significant enough to merit its own essay, so I shall leave it out of this one). The Govinda advertisement is easy to publish because it generates no controversy other than, perhaps, some tension between those who wear VIP and those who wear Rupa. Bengalis still swear by 'Gopal Genji', but that is a regional quirk.

**H**ow can the potentially persuasive power of photographs be harnessed into a collective introspection? By allowing them to do what they do best – celebrate diversity, generate interest in the mundane, create empathy with the voiceless. It would be foolish to require all photographers to share a common agenda, but it is reasonable

to expect them to be wary of infusing their work with an inaccurate optimism. If a photographer sees India's saffrons in shades of grey, then let it show in her work. If a photographer sees in the spectrum of the population a spectrum of colours, then let that show in her work.

**J**ust as the English architect Herbert Baker went against Edwin Lutyens and the prevailing disdain for Indian architecture by insisting on adding *chhatris* to the secretariat buildings in Delhi, let us hope that photographers have the courage to fight some of the prevailing wisdoms of our times. If they achieve the beauty that Stieglitz envisioned, they are likely to have an audience. And if the exploratory photographers among them follow the methods that Guha promotes, then they may even mobilize this audience. Photographs are capable of moulding the relationship between an individual and his society, and might therefore be instrumental in preventing a society from imploding. At worst, they may shed some light on the peculiarities of a country where L.K. Advani calmly watches the Babri Masjid going down while his daughter is safe in Paris, studying French.

And occasionally, a photographer might find, in an unlikely place, a strand that unexpectedly weaves through this giant population. Raghubir Singh's posthumously published book, *A Way Into India*, does just that. It is a book of pictures taken from and of the Ambassador car. To conclude, an excerpt from his introductory essay about the car: 'It is now a part of India's long journey. It is an organic part of bird shit and cow dung-coated India. It is the good and the bad of India. It is a solid part of India that moves on, even as it falls apart, or lags behind. In its imperfection it is truly an Indian automobile.'



# Thinking like us

ARUNABHA GHOSH

AT some point we all expect it to happen. India has developed the comparative advantage of keeping the world in anticipation of its advent as a great power. Having been called both a rising superpower *and* a third rate power, India's foreign policy-makers have a hard time explaining away this contradiction. When analyses on India conclude that 'what is true, the opposite is also true', it proves the cynics right but also encourages fatuity in others. Nevertheless, ever since the metaphor of the 'golden bird' first made the transition from mythology to myth and then to apocryphal 'fact', we have internalised a mawkish sentimentality and belief in a civilisational destiny which seems to persist despite a more subdued reality.

Unfortunately, foreign policy cannot remain immune to the contra-

dictions. It cannot have the comfort of expressing itself only through annual General Assembly speeches or biennial exhortations of developing country unity at WTO ministerial conferences. To formulate a foreign policy independent of domestic politics is a vision for the elites and a mirage for the masses. To demand that the country speak with one voice is a chimera; public debate remains central to a democracy. But the debate must not centre around specific issues alone; rather, it has to account for our transforming environment and how we want to project ourselves in that milieu. What follows is a discussion of some of these dimensions to encourage a debate on the role we seek for ourselves.

There are three new dimensions to the global environment that we



reside in. These dimensions are not necessarily post Cold War or post September 11. While these dynamics do not always overlap, our simultaneous engagement with them has implications for our perceived role in the world. First, the world is now characterised by an American preponderance. I avoid the term *hegemony* because it raises a separate debate about benign versus coercive hegemony. Nevertheless, in terms of material resources – the world's largest economy by far and the only military machine with a global reach – the American colossus is preponderant over the world order. Further, its participation or even non-participation in international regimes (whether the Anti-Landmine Treaty or the Kyoto Protocol) certainly affects the efficacy of attempts at international cooperation.

Second, the degree to which globalisation and the information revolution transform our economic, cultural and political participation in the world depends on our attitudes towards them. American political scientist James Rosenau describes the process as *fragmegration* to highlight that integration into larger global identities runs simultaneously with fragmentation into smaller communities – the two can in fact reinforce each other. The reassertion of local identities by the Zapatistas in Mexico became possible when they also considered themselves part of a global community which would be sympathetic to their cause.

**A** mistaken belief in this regard is that the US controls globalisation. There is no doubt that globalisation, by depending on technological advances (in which the US enjoys the lead) as well as policies to support a more integrating world, has reinforced American power but this does not imply that

the US can have its cake and eat it too. No country is completely immune to the shocks of financial crises, environmental changes or non-conventional security challenges.

Globalisation is influenced by networks – whether for financial flows, trade in goods and services, supply chains for transnational manufacturing, governance of international organisations, contacts between international and sub-national NGOs, and most importantly, networks for information flows. The actor that controls the flows of information will more often than not gain policy outcomes most favourable to its preferences. In a world with non-hierarchical networks of governance, the critical question is how can we control or influence these networks of governance and what strategies can we develop to frame issues of international concern.

**T**hird, geography has not become history. Instead, the world has become our home. The geostrategic importance of South Asia will vary over time and we cannot rely on dramatic events to get the world's attention. After September 11 the French liberal newspaper *Le Monde* announced, 'We are all Americans.' India feels frustrated that the international community has remained unsympathetic to its suffering from terrorism and even the attention it has received in the past year is through American lenses. But to insist in prime ministerial speeches and MEA briefs that South Asia is the epicentre of global terrorism is to only highlight the geostrategic aspect.

As Stephen Cohen and Richard Park noted in *India: Emergent Power?* (Crane Russak, 1978), geostrategically India stands between 'pygmies and giants'. Such a perspective would then make us look both hegemonic and weak – a bully no one listens to. The challenge for India is not to gain inter-

national sympathy but an international sense of community. Can we get the *Guardian* to proclaim, 'We are all Indians now?' In some quarters such a proclamation may be regarded as yet another dose of patronising that we loathe. Yet, the power of ideas is strong. It is not the region we inhabit that is critical but whether others think like us *and* whether we think like them.

**I**f our wider environment is indeed as described, is it that we accept outcomes as inevitable or unchallengeable? In other words, are we disinterested in foreign policy? Elections in India do sometimes focus on issues that have international ramifications, whether it is the desire for nuclear power status or targeting 'Mian Musharraf'. Similarly, protests against the WTO are responses to our, sometimes legitimate, economic fears. Having to react and respond to external shocks, pressures and obligations is not irrelevant to the discourse, but it is not sufficient for the formulation of long-term policies.

If we show a lack of interest in this larger debate then public opinion will hang precariously between triumphalism and despondency. This is characteristic of the way we react to nuclear weapons one day and IC-184 the next. An exaggerated sense of national pride is illusory but so is carping at the failures of the state in projecting India's 'deserved' power. Hopefully by appreciating the importance of the three global dimensions discussed above, we may realise that our view of the world has to be dynamic, not merely passive or reactive.

In failing to do so we run the risk that policy would be hijacked by special interest groups. Governments across the world face pressures from specific constituencies whose policy preferences need not be in the

'national interest' at all times. But if governments believe that by restricting information they can retain autonomy over policy they risk losing the support of the larger polity which can help to counter the influence of interest groups.

In *The Paradox of American Power* (OUP 2002), Joseph Nye argues that there has developed an 'optimism gap' in the US. Since an average citizen does not come into direct contact with national issues her/his opinion on such issues is shaped by the tone of the national print and electronic media. So even if one's personal socio-economic condition is satisfactory, she/he can still be pessimistic about the national situation.

In a similar vein, I would argue that in India we suffer from a *perception gap*. We are politically conscious about the problems we encounter in dealing with the local administration. We even have opinions about national issues, whether it is caste politics or communalism. These are issues that affect our lives at the local and the national level. However, despite having opinions on international issues we are unable to perceive them as intimately as we could and then shape local politics. This results in extreme views on the country's world status depending on our interpretation of newspaper or television reports.

Our perceptions, having been formed by reports on discrete events, have gaps in them which cannot be filled unless we have participated in a public debate that has produced some yardstick for Indian foreign policy. Disagreements with Washington or Brussels, Beijing or Islamabad cannot be the sum total of an Indian foreign policy.

Our interest, as a polity, in foreign policy has to develop around two themes: first, our view of ourselves;

second, our view of the world. These two themes should combine to set the broad agenda of Indian foreign policy in the future. The articulation of national interests is ultimately the function of expediency and specific policies might have to compromise on our goals. Yet, such an endeavour will help to fill the perceptual gaps in comprehending why certain policy initiatives were successful and why extraneous circumstances led to the failure of others. As the systemic pressures of the Cold War and geostrategy have given way to those of globalisation and geoeconomics, we have to draw on our resources to enunciate a worldview that situates us not as passive respondents to change but as aggressive drivers of global transformation.

What are the sources of Indian power? First, the existence of democratic institutions remains the one beacon that inspires commentators on India. Institutions are no doubt challenged and administrative failures manifest themselves in ways that often exacerbate the suffering of people. In a survey of students from premier educational institutions in four cities, *The Times of India* on 22 December 2002 reported that 19% of the respondents (the third highest number) wanted Hitler to lead the country (ironically the highest number had wanted Mahatma Gandhi). The nature of the response clearly reveals a perceptual gap.

Assuming that the respondents cherish their freedoms (possibly even castigate China for the lack of them or mock Pakistan for its democratic failings), how can they also wish for dictators who could rule the country with a strong hand? Our democratic institutions have ensured civilian control over the military, separation of the judiciary, and legislative oversight

over executive actions. To impugn our record of democratic performance is *part* of the democratic process. But to conclude that democracy *per se* is responsible for a weak and ineffectual state is a *non sequitur*. The more democracy finds roots in countries proximate to us the better are our chances of cooperating on economic, social and territorial issues.

Second, India's economy will demand attention in the global economy by its sheer size (fourth largest in purchasing power parity terms). On the flip side, if we continue to grow at 6% and the US at 3%, it would take till 2077 to match the American economy and till 2133 to be at par with its per capita income. Numbers can only take us so far; they are not enough for us to develop a sense of our position in the global economic order. It is imperative that we begin to think of the positive role we must play. Economic growth, even if it occurs without hitches, does not translate into power unless a country is willing to use its economy as a source of growth and stability for the entire world economy.

Despite their current recessionary trends, Japan and Germany will remain major economic players in the foreseeable future. But their economic power will be undermined by the unwillingness to shoulder the responsibility of the world economy. Germany was at the vanguard of the Growth and Stability Pact that informs fiscal policy in the Euro-zone. Now it not only suffers from excessive constraints on its policy autonomy but also fails to serve as a locomotive to bring the world out of its recession.

Similarly, it is not enough for India to present the second or third fastest growth rates in the world. That is indeed impressive but not power enhancing. India's economic power will gain currency when we play a

constructive role in international institutions. The control of networks of governance will not accrue to us if we only view international economic institutions as robbers of our sovereignty. Similarly, a huge trade surplus against Bangladesh is not nearly as impressive as some credible signs to the Bangladeshis that we are willing to let them piggyback on the performance of the Indian economy.

**T**hird, India's military potential has to be measured against its objectives. Nuclear weapons, intermediate range missiles, 1.2 million military personnel are impressive in their own right but pale against China's (according to a RAND study of 2000 titled *Asian Economic Trends and their Security Implications*, India's military stock was 48% of China's and would rise to 62% by 2015) or even a moderately-sized West European country in terms of technological sophistication.

India's security challenges are immense – we have to stand up to nuclear threats, disputes over nearly 7000 of our 16500 km of land borders, terrorism, defence of over 6000 km of coastline, and also force projection in the Indian Ocean rim. When the *USS Enterprise* was despatched to the Bay of Bengal during the Bangladesh War, it was treated as an insult and a strategic threat. By 1972, defence analyst K. Subrahmanyam had conceptualised the need for 'raising the cost of intervention' in *Our National Security* (Economic and Scientific Research Foundation, London) to ensure that India's strategic space was not compromised. Most recently, Bharat Karnad argues that India must reinstate the British 19th century doctrine of 'distant defence' for India and create a strategic zone of influence that stretches from East Africa to the Caspian to Tibet down to Australia (*Seminar* 519).

Our influence across the Indian Ocean will come into conflict with American, British, Australian and Chinese interests. Given India's material deficiencies, the conversion of its military might into effective power can occur only by two simultaneous processes. First, the modernisation of our conventional and strategic forces. The debate should not be over increases or decreases in defence expenditures but whether we are acquiring the appropriate capabilities to secure our defence needs.

Second, and more significantly, undertaking the burden of responsibility for policing the waters against terrorism, countering clandestine weapons proliferation, and keeping sea lanes open. Great power status does not follow from military might alone. Our force projection has to come packaged with the assertion that we are bearing the costs of providing global public goods in this region. As argued earlier, geography remains important but we have to make others think like us and prove that we can address their concerns.

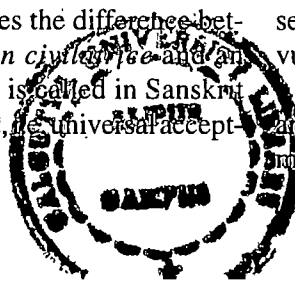
**E**ven the power that accrues from material capabilities ultimately relies on the principles that underlie it. A country's influence in world affairs depends on two dimensions of power. The more obvious one is the ability to use material capabilities to force outcomes. Even if it were couched in the language of legitimacy and 'soft power', 'soft coercion' does not make international relations any less coercive. India is no exception to countries following this rule. However, a less explored dimension of power is the attractiveness of values in its own right. Herein lies the difference between a *mission civilisatrice* and an appeal to what is called in Sanskrit *vishwajananitā*, i.e. universal acceptability.

The former is an aspiration to actively convert others (using hard or soft power) to one's way of thinking. This strategy is manifest as much in the scramble for Africa in the 1890s as in the Washington Consensus on economic reforms in the 1980s. The latter succeeds when a particular value which can be credited to a certain country or people is invoked by others as worth emulating. Thus, South Korea's economic model or Malaysia's policies of building social capital through inter-ethnic integration could potentially prove as attractive as the model of European integration.

**T**he debate on defining our role in the world is important for this reason. We will not have the material capabilities to compete with more advanced countries in the near future. Neither will we have so-called 'soft power' resources like McDonald's restaurants or Japanese animation features to effectively 'impose' our way of life upon others. In 1945, French philosopher Alexandre Kojève, acknowledging France's material deficiencies at the end of the war, argued that the only way for France to regain any international prominence would be to reaffirm its cultural and social values and aesthetics.

Our foreign policy will have to fundamentally base itself on the models of economic, educational, social and political development that we adopt. If successful, these models will significantly augment the acceptability of our growing military and economic strength. Even Gandhi's *non-absolute* pacifism and use of *ahimsa* as a dynamic political tool are suggestive of his concern for national security and welfare for a materially vulnerable country.

India's unique ethnic, religious and linguistic diversity and its experiments with multiple identities is one



such source of *vishwajananatâ*. The American melting pot thesis, erstwhile Soviet attempts at Russian linguistic and cultural hegemony, or recent European experiments with multiculturalism have all been strategies to come to terms with varied populations. India's history is its best advantage because despite the political turmoil that has always plagued this land multiple identities have co-existed much more naturally than in other regions.

**C**ambridge historian C.A. Bayly finds traditions of patriotism and ideas of good governance existing alongside recognition of ethnic identities in India prior to the onset of a British-engineered nation state in the sub-continent. Thus he writes in *Origins of Nationality in South Asia* (OUP 1998), 'If the twenty-first century sees the emergence of the "Europe of the regions", it may also see the emergence of an "India of all the patriotisms".' Religion and community are not redundant but efforts will have to continue to retain those multiple identities.

Pulitzer Prize winner Thomas Friedman appreciates that India's democracy is one reason why Muslims in India have not been radicalised as elsewhere because they still hope to use democratic processes to redress their grievances and fulfil their aspirations (*New York Times*, 14 August 2002). Yet, our claims of communal harmony sound hollow, especially since the Gujarat riots. Every time our social order breaks down due to politico-religious manipulations, the attractiveness of our model loses its appeal. This matters because a successful model gives direction to countries as varied as Indonesia, Nigeria or even a post-Saddam democratic Iraq.

Similarly, the power of 'culture', though a highly contested term, can yet

be important. When the 'American way of life' competes with 'European post-modernism', when 'Scandinavian pacifism' makes political impact just as 'Asian values' and Confucian ethics engender economic transformation, what does India's 'composite culture' hold out for the rest of the world? Surely, such characterisations are constructed labels but it cannot be denied that there have been significant power-enhancing benefits of the English language or the Alliance Francaise. The Indian film industry with about \$60 million of exports has a strong impact on how the rest of the world perceives us. Again, the 20 million members of the Indian diaspora do build some bridges on foreign investment and chicken tikka masala.

**S**uch dynamics can aid Indian foreign policy but also have the potential of creating distorted imaginations about the country. If we seek international prominence through the strength of universal acceptability, we have to become much more conscious of such existing and incipient distortions. Our foreign policy will then have to be geared not only towards using these additional resources but also to damage limitation exercises. A more instrumental strategy is the funding of India related academic and policy study in major universities around the world while also establishing more scholarships and exchange programmes for foreign students to visit and work in India. There is no better way to open the minds of future policy-makers about India, its malaises and its extraordinary strengths.

A final dimension is our leadership of the developing world. Critical analysis of non-alignment, the G-77, or the NIEO are apt only to the extent that they re-examine policies for their current usefulness. If we dismiss these

strategies outright as naïve we commit the fallacy of viewing the past through the lenses of the present. The articulation of policy initiatives that might have had beneficial spillovers for other countries cannot be dismissed as mere altruism.

In a speech to the Constituent Assembly on 4 December 1947 Nehru said, 'We may talk about international goodwill... about peace and freedom... [b]ut, in the ultimate analysis, a government functions for the good of the country...' In the process if we have developed close relations with other countries we cannot pay scant attention to them now. It is often asked if India is friendless.

**E**ven in the 1950s it was argued that our moral grandstanding on colonialism or nuclear weapons denied us the support of western countries on Kashmir or exposed us when we invaded Goa. Friendly relations are maintained less through pacts of brotherhood than through mutual interests. India's leadership was accepted for reasons of state, whether its contribution to resolving the Korean conflict, its technological support to African economies or its aid programmes for the Himalayan kingdoms. India would commit a grave error if it relinquishes the status it holds amongst other nations simply because institutions and policies developed in the 1950s and 1960s are no longer considered relevant or effective enough. India has to find new issues that build on these past relationships, which again emphasises the networks of international governance.

Human rights, humanitarian intervention, global environmental changes and protection of the global commons are some of the issues that the developing world has been traditionally reticent to negotiate upon. No doubt the developed West, and

especially the US, has repeatedly adhered to double standards on these issues. However, we cannot refuse to acknowledge these concerns behind a firewall of state sovereignty. The first step is to recognise that these issues are part of our national interests. The second is to ally with developing and developed countries to actively participate in setting standards and developing institutions.

We are worse off when we sign treaties pledging to uphold norms only as a *fait accompli*. In addition, our relations with the developing world will benefit us in evolving newer strategies for economic integration and identifying areas of positive negotiations. The more recent examples of seeking out issue-based alliances at the WTO are indicative of a trend in a desirable direction.

**A**n oft-repeated shortcoming in our analysis is highlighted when we interpret our values to be inconsistent with our interests. We engage in academic debates on who is a 'realist' or lament at the naïveté of some policy or on labelling India as a 'soft' or 'hard' state. Surely, diplomats and experts will profess their wisdom but the polity is often trapped in the perceptual gaps between their personal experiences and their indirect awareness of foreign policies. We cannot demand the 'realism' brand of foreign policy of a 'strong' state and then excoriate it when it cannot deliver.

The *Arthashastra* is not the only source of statecraft in our classical tradition. Even then it emphasises interests based on a state's position in the system of states and what it seeks to attain using its available resources. Whether it is Manu's *Dharmashastra*, the Tamil *Book of Kural*, Ashokan Buddhist edicts, or Abul Fazl's *Ain-i-Akbari*, they have all been

informed by ideas of ethical government. Even the champion of realist thought in western political philosophy, Machiavelli, advised that the prince must 'not depart from good, when possible.'

In 1959 the late A. Appadurai, doyen of Indian international relations scholarship, in an essay titled *Indian Diplomacy* argued that classical Indian thought laid equal emphasis on the means as on the ends. Though these are the values that we adhere to, we cannot be oblivious to the demands of expediency. Private morality and public ethics cannot always be equated. Our worldviews, as argued, will depend on material capabilities and the ideas and principles that we believe define us. Therefore, having an interest-based approach is not incompatible or even distinct from a value-based approach since one is the cause of the other. It is when we label ourselves as one or the other, realist or peace loving, that we misinterpret our worldviews and encounter frustrations in foreign policy.

**T**he future of India in world affairs is not preordained. Our economic might or a Security Council seat cannot by themselves transmute into power and influence. In order to fill our perception gaps it matters more that we develop worldviews with a world role in mind, not hegemonic but engaging and responsible. Economic leadership in international organisations, setting standards for changing international norms, assuming military responsibilities to guarantee global public goods, and the attraction of our values, institutions and cultural resources will be more successful in gaining us the power and prestige we desire than mourning our perceived weakness. To make others think like us, we have to begin thinking like them.

# Ways of becoming

ASHLEY TELLIS

THE past, the present and the future are all contested terrains in the field of Indian sexualities. The past is often plumbed to create traditions, to give us a sense of belonging. Yet there is a perilous price to pay in the creation of traditions. Most often, they are more imagined than real and involve distortions of history, groups (as Indian women will testify) can feel burdened by them and many of us have argued for the right to be who we are and who we want to be, whether or not it is sanctioned by traditions.

Who creates traditions anyway? Distortion, wishful thinking or fantasy, traditions still give us a sense of solace, comfort that we are not alone in desiring or desiring the wrong body. More useful has been a considerable body of quite marvellous work done by Indian feminists which traces sexuality as barely perceptibly but almost immanently embedded in a series of discourses and practices around social control, state and community formation, and social reform.<sup>1</sup> Most of this centres around violence, female sexuality in need of violent control. It is

through violence that women in India have known (and continue to know) sexuality most intimately.

So much has changed for Indian women over the latter half of the last century and yet it appears like too little. Sexuality in the present is still marked by violence against women. More women are raped and more brazenly. Gujarat 2002 witnessed a systematic genocide against the Muslim women of Gujarat. Feminists in India still can't say the S word without faltering, and the familiar hiss of resentment still sussurates at that first syllable, asking for silence, reprimanding them for breaking taboos.

Yet men can wreak the most systematically obscene violence against women on a routine basis. Television screens, film posters, page 3 photographs, glossy magazines and the net (by no means an exhaustive list) have a surfeit of crudely sexualized women being avidly consumed by Indians, more than ever before. This is just the most obvious of a series of contradictions that mark the present. But no new

\* for Nishit Saran.

1. I have in mind the work of scholars such as Uma Chakravarti, Tanika Sarkar, Kumkum Sangari, Janaki Nair and others. See Kumkum

Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (eds), *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History* (Delhi: Kali, 1989) and Patricia Uberoi (ed), *Social Reform, Sexuality and the State* (Delhi: Sage, 1996).

generation of feminists are doing the sort of work on the present that the last generation did on the past.

What are we to make of these disjunctions? Women's sexuality is not explored, but we have an emergent masculinity studies, not really informed by and emerging out of the women's movement (as it did in Britain, for example) and all set to mark men as involved in 'supportive practices' (whatever these are) when we have not yet come to terms with men's violence on women and each other. Women continue to be robbed of justice after being raped, but certain feminists want a gender-neutral law on rape modelled on Scandinavian countries and work done in elite western law schools. Same-sex communities don't have an identity in our laws but this new law will cover violence between same-sex couples according to these feminists who feel no need to consult or consider the opinion of independent feminist groups and same-sex rights groups working across the country.

**V**iolence at the hands of the state and community or family on women's sexuality and same-sex sexualities continues apace. Being heterosexual in India is as beleaguered as being anything else. Heterosexual couples across India are hacked to death for transgressing caste barriers, lynched by panchayats and public alike; couples are hounded out of public spaces and arrested, released only if they are engaged to be married; single mothers have no legal rights whatsoever, yet some feminists think the law may be useless and unnecessary to women. Globalisation in the field of same-sex politics actually produces cultural categories and gendered identities dictated by the logics of global funding from the North more than any need on the ground. US-funded NGOs dic-

tate how we should live and who we are, in a language so absurd that it would be funny, were its effects not so deleterious.

**T**hese are some of the mind-boggling elements that constitute the present. If, earlier, the Manichean division was between the discourses of sexuality-as-violence and sexuality-as-pleasure, both now coexist in parallel but different domains. However, neither stream is seriously engaging with what sexuality might really mean to us as subjects nor do the two inform each other, even as surely pleasure and violence both inform sexuality. Both discourses are discrete and operate in mutually exclusive terrains. Pressured by the violence of contemporary practices, feminist work on sexual violence tends to void the subject of any sexual agency. Desire, the hegemonic language through which we understand sexual agency, surely does not belong here is the argument. It is simply violence against women.

However, this may be our biggest mistake. This is apparent in same-sex politics where we are so impelled by the need to respond to state or family violence that we forget the desiring subject enveloped in this violence and protest. This is not a purely desiring subject waiting to be disinterred from the mess of politics, but a subject whose desire is formed within, caught in and also resisting the field of politics in which it finds itself. We might have to redefine our conception of desire, take it out of some simple understanding of pleasure and situate it in the various conflicting and coalescing fields that inform and constitute it.

Meanwhile, the other language of limitless, consumerist desire unfolds itself repeatedly and in patterns of repetition: Miss Universes, naked bodies in music videos, glossy women's magazines with articles on how

to seduce your man, naked bodies in movies, in the newspapers every morning: all apparently a language of sexuality as desire but fixed in class, caste, age grids and revolving pretty much in the bubble, large as it is, of that world. The violence that goes into these images is effaced, lost in the paint. The desiring female agent is a bad ass materialist, but there is little else to her subjectivity; she is curiously disembodied or nothing more than a concatenation of body parts, the staple of pornographic fantasy. A more insidious form of this desire has now crept into one variant of feminist discourse in dealing with the sex worker, an area I will delineate later on in this piece.

**S**o who is the Indian sexual subject? The truth is, in India, there are very few self-identified sexual subjects, if any. Indiatimes.com has a set of chat rooms 'Man to Man' and 'Woman to Woman' and the former room is almost always populated by dozens of men on the lookout for sex with other men in the city, the neighbourhood. But almost none of them are 'gay', most are married and a great percentage of them homophobic. Yet this is not Shivananda Khan's classically ridiculous behaviour/identity dichotomy. Sex with men is not only a behaviour with the men in these rooms, it is more complicated and intersubjective than that. It is just not intersubjective in salubrious ways and not merely because this is not the way that take us, evolutionally, to the fully formed gay subject.

Women marry each other in what seems like the most radical attack on patriarchy. They appropriate the institution of Hindu marriage, in the temple. Yet these are invariably women with one of them dressed as a man, playing the man's role while the other is the 'woman' and takes off her lov-



er's shoes every evening. This is no self-defined, well-adjusted 'lesbian' subject. Nor is this only role-play or radical chic. The female sex worker may still retain a sense of the private and the pleasurable in the spaces between the shards of her disembodied existence, but this sense can't be made to replace that disembodiment, substitute it or paper it over. There are serious contradictions that disable linear narratives of desire and doom, identity and self-fashioning.

**A**s if the fashioning of the self and the other were not messy enough, practices operate in impossibly heterogeneous sites in India. Sodomy as a phenomenon, for example, is part of the logic of Article 377, a brutal reality of prison life but with no recognition and acceptance of it, part of the daily life (prostitution in which many of them are involved) and harassment (by the police) of hijras, a violence in the form of paedophilia (a routine part of the lives of economically poor, labouring children), part of class, caste and national forms of humiliation, a weapon of state oppression and a part of adult consensual desire (whether between two men or heterosexual couples) all at the same time. How does one tackle it? How many NGOs have mobilized around such sites or worked with such groups, taking up the issue of sodomy?

Sexuality research demands a combined grasp of the historical and material contexts of its production and circulation; also a plumbing of the psyche and subconscious to trace the creation of sexuality's languages for different subjects. Our psychoanalytic work only involves ahistorical mumbo jumbo by the likes of Sudhir Kakar and Ashis Nandy; the material contexts we know only appear to be that of bored urban housewives interviewed about their sexual fantasies by

tired and deluded sociologists. This combination of difficult subjects and multiple contexts demands a new sociological vocabulary which can encapsulate it. The available machinery does not appear adequate at all.

Hegemonic understandings of sexuality and sexuality-based identity, particularly that of the globalising homosexual/heterosexual binary have monolithized communities and limited the possibilities of democratic sexual politics. We need ways of restoring the diversity of communities and making their complexities inform and restructure the ways in which we conceptualise sexual identity, self, community and sexual politics.

**H**ow, then, to build that future? What future do we see emerging from this mess of contradictions? At the best of times, it is difficult to theorise sexuality. Where is it? At the heart of it all, as western feminisms believed for a while? One of many discourses? Embedded in every discourse? Overrated and unimportant? In a sociological matrix as mind-boggling as India's, the question becomes even more inscrutable. As Juliet Mitchell once famously asked: What are we in the process of becoming?<sup>2</sup>

The easy way out is to speak of what future one would want to see and create a self-satisfying scenario based on fantasy. What is more difficult to imagine is where sexuality is actually located. What is definite is that the most important phenomenon that

2. Mitchell asks this in relation to the project of feminist criticism. If the feminist subject is not some pre-Oedipal irrational, plural dervish, nor simply a post-Oedipal victim determined by patriarchy and femininity, what is she? The question can be transposed to the Indian context quite effectively. If the Indian woman is neither pure agent nor pure victim, what is she? See Juliet Mitchell, 'Femininity, Narrative and Psychoanalysis', in *The Longest Revolution: Essays on Feminism, Literature and Psychoanalysis* (London: Virago, 1984).

frames sexuality is globalisation: it affects every area of sexuality – from sex practices to social work on sex and sexuality, from sexual identities to sexual health (thanks to the global Aids phenomenon), from sexual rights to academic research on sexuality.

**N**ow, globalisation appears to be a difference-producing machine. Witness the multiplication of same-sex identities in India over recent years. LGBTHKQ? (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Hijra, Kothi, Questioning(!)) Surely this is a healthy diversity? Quite the opposite, actually. There is a way in which globalisation produces a language of plurality even as it erases that very plurality at the moment of its avowal. The alphabet soup of categories quoted above are created by urban NGOs, comprising evolved and internationalized same-sex subjects who work within the rights-based identities framework, seek international funds and recognition, seek to put international pressure on national regimes and speak the international language of sexual politics. The difference in these multiplying categories, then, is merely notional, at best exotica and quixotica. Many groups in the soup are barely touched (hijras, for example) and the resistance of subjects to such categorization (by the so-called kothis, for example) ignored. What's important is to keep the global sexuality funding machine going.

Same-sex communities have piggybacked their way into the Indian scene on Aids, yet the worst effects of Aids are not on same-sex communities here (unlike Western Europe and North America) but on heterosexualised women sex workers. Nevertheless, certain feminists are talking of the sex worker's desire (if you please!) instead of her fatal virus or her enforced status.



Aids itself is not really a governmental priority, though Aids funds certainly are. Condom ads are banned in certain states and the central government does not bat an eyelid. Perhaps it thinks Hindus are above Aids, that it is the disease of the infidels. But the global logics of Aids research and funds eat into the so-called alternative sector in India, the NGO world. Our new theorists on sexuality are the NGOs and, whether they'd like to believe it or not, they are working to pre-set agendas even as they are allowed to make pretty pictures of 'difference'.

**T**he fact is that NGOs have taken over the field of sexuality in India. The women's movement increasingly appears to have sold out to the NGO world. We hardly have any independent, non-funded women's groups emerging from communities in the society. All we have are a multitude of foreign-funded women's NGOs speaking the international lingo of aid-based 'gender' discourse and yoking the contexts they are based in to fit these apparently flexible, but actually rigid, frames.

None of these groups have a mass base, none of them work with groups in serious need of help or if they do work with them, it is in completely counterproductive ways, like the 'sex worker and desire' nonsense mentioned earlier. NGOs have edged out all possible independent initiative by groups and communities. Soon we will not have any social movements left, we'll have 'community-based' groups and 'outreach' groups and whatever other groups are created by the preposterous jargon of the NGO world.

The fact is that NGOs have no accountability. They claim to fight for the rights of the underprivileged and for equality, yet they are the worst exploiters of labour. They underpay,

overwork and exploit labour and there are no NGO labour unions even though the agendas of many may be fighting for the creation of unions among other labouring groups. NGOs function along increasingly corporate lines, they speak corporate lingo and aspire to corporate organisation. Their understanding of issues does not come from any grassroots based reality but rather the manuals of groups and identities abroad. They do not attempt to understand the contexts they claim to work in but superimpose ludicrous grids onto groups here, causing much damage. One of the most painful ironies of my experience was of a feminist NGO being among the worst abusers of women.

**A**cademic work is scarcely different. All the worst clichés about Indian academics sitting in plush offices in North America and pontificating on pain, alas, are true. This is not to suggest that if you are sitting and writing about pain from a plush or not so plush office/home in Patparganj, you are necessarily doing any better, though you may want to feel more sanctimonious about it. What is effected is that we are all being roped in by a professionalised US academic discourse which we use and about which we are not at all reflexive. We end up producing interpretations that have more to do with churning out theoretically fashionable (US academia) and rhetorically chiming (with global NGO discourse) papers and books and less to do with the realities of our subjects, ourselves.

This infection by US discourse has entered journalism, the media and 'creative writing' as well. So child sexual abuse and incest, two of the most well-kept secrets and horrendous realities of Indian society are left untouched by NGOs (apart from a few eminently disgraceful exceptions, like

the ones framing the gender-neutral rape law) and academics and taken up by manicured and deeply voyeuristic journoes who write books viciously exploitative of their subjects and posh fag playwrights who don't know their angst from their adipose, yet write appalling plays and make more-than-appalling films on the subject.

**F**inally, it is not as though mass-based movements and 'indigenous' organizations are without their problems. Consider, for example, the fact that for two years running now, the two Left party women's organizations have not allowed lesbians to march in the International Women's Day rally on March 8. Their arguments are unreconstructed and embarrassing, proving that like Left men, Left women are also pre-sexual, have no libido and blush at the S word. The Left in India, as a whole, then, is sexless and mimics the mindless heterosexism of its rightwing adversaries, adding to the list of things on which they are in perfect consonance with the Right.

Consider this statement by the NFIW that same-sex communities in India are 'an invasion of India by decadent western culture and a direct fall-out of our signing the GATT agreement (!)' and their urging the prime minister 'not to follow Bill Clinton's immoral approach to sexual perversion in the US.'<sup>3</sup> Or, more recently, AIDWA writing to The Campaign for Lesbian Rights (CALERI) that a lesbian banner would 'cause confusion' and agreeing with NFIW that there were other more pressing priorities. This shows a complete inability to see the integrated nature of sexual reality, how it is inextricably intertwined with other aspects of reality and oppression and needs to be

3. Praful Goradia, quoting from the NFIW's press statement in a report in *The Times of India*, 9 November 1994.

addressed to change the status of women, perhaps especially, working class women.

**T**he current predominant trend in feminist, same-sex movements and sexual discourses in general in India, deracinated from its constituencies, is to accept the terms on which globalisation and its internationalisation of certain types of identity and identity politics works uncritically. If Dennis Altman, for example, has triumphantly announced the internationalisation of gay identity and sees no great problems with globalisation and the bringing of an individualist rights discourse and understanding of identity to the Third World,<sup>4</sup> he is echoed by same-sex activists throughout Asia and Africa.<sup>5</sup> If Amnesty International, ILGA and international funding agencies are willing to unproblematically promulgate these notions of identity, the resistance to it is easily drowned out. It is important then to be aware of the violences of this internationalist discourse of which we so freely partake.

As Neville Hoad asks:

By attempting to transform participants in certain corporeal intimacies into homosexual persons, do we not do a great disservice to the vast majority of participants in same-sex acts in other places? To assert the universal-

ity of a specific historical agent can, and arguably is, closing down spaces for these participants without replicating the set of historical circumstances which allowed gayness to have historical agency in the West. This is especially so given the unevenness of capitalist development globally. The universalism that promises liberation ends up as oppression.<sup>6</sup>

Hoad is talking here of same-sex politics but this applies to sexuality in the non-West as a whole. The important phrase is 'specific historical agent' and it is only when we build a politics out of a close attention to the specific historical contexts of agents, both past and present, in their multiple contexts, that we can understand sexuality and sexual formations in India.

**W**e need to use deep sociological and anthropological material from women and minority same-sex communities to question the ways in which dominant paradigms collapse complexity and difference even within the hegemonic community. We need to resuscitate this diversity for a more productive sexual politics at the levels of family, community and state and, ultimately, a more democratic and nuanced understanding of the role of sexuality in our lives.

We also, of course, should be aware that even robust notions of difference and diversity could easily fall back into fetishism, reification and a whole range of less than desirable othering processes. Configurations of minority and majority definitions in the US, for example, continually struggle with this sameness/difference conundrum. The facile multiculturalism of 'Let's celebrate our differences' obscures the role of power in

constituting those differences, yet the universal too is frequently implicitly white, male and bourgeois. We need to work through this philosophical impasse here too, to see through the facile plurality of globalising discourse as much as discern the homogenizing processes at work beneath the rhetoric of rights and identity politics as we know it. This can only be done by grounding representations of these contexts in their material bases and building a framework based on praxis more than anything else.

**T**his politics may have to eschew a large part of received conceptions of identity even as it does not disavow totally the importance of strategically using the colonial machinery like the law and civil rights to demand a space. It will have to be sensitive to the particularities in the articulation of the location of any group (whether heterosexual women, hijras or women identified women) without falling into the easy and distortionate pleasures of western categories (western feminism, gay and lesbian rights) or nativist indigenism (Vedic lesbians, homosexuality as western vice). Reality, as we know, is somewhere in between these two.<sup>7</sup>

Most of all, then, it would need to be rigorously aware of and constantly interrogating the assumptions behind any of its own articulations and the institutions and frameworks it may use to further those articulations. It is only then that we can hope to forge a politics that is truly capable of imagining what we are in the process of becoming.

4. Dennis Altman, 'The Internationalization of Gay Identity', *Social Text*, Vol. 14, No. 3, Fall (1996), 77-94 and 'Talking Sex' *Postcolonial Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (2000), 171-178.

5. See, for example, the essay by Oliver Phillips, 'Constituting the Global Gay Issues of Individual Subjectivity and Sexuality in Southern Africa', in *Law and Sexuality in the Global Arena* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2001). Originally published as *Sexuality in the Legal Arena* (Althone Press, 2000) and Peter Jackson, 'Kathoeys <Gay> <Man> Sexualities in Asia and the Pacific', in Lenore Manderson and Margaret Jolly eds., *Sites of Desire/Economies of Pleasure*. (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1996).

6. Neville Hoad, 'Arrested Development or the Queerness of Savages: Resisting Evolutionary Narratives of Difference', *Postcolonial Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (2000), 133-158.

7. For a nuanced reading of colonialism's complicated legacy and how postcolonialism is necessarily inflected by a mixture of coloniser and colonised, which is neither necessarily debilitating nor involves the erasure of colonial violence, see Nicholas Thomas, *Colonialism's Culture: Anthropology, Travel and Government* (Cambridge: Polity, 1994).

# Imagining post-Indian histories

BODHISATTVA KAR

Nation states immensely invest in production, mobilization and disciplining of memories. It would be naïve to think that such investments – ideological, financial, institutional and otherwise – do not affect the texture of produced historical knowledge. While authenticity of particular histories is determined within the professional discourse in reference to established standards of coherence and correspondence,<sup>1</sup> the social authority of historians is formed within the materialities of placements, publications and commissions.<sup>2</sup> In the political structure we inhabit, these materialities are largely supervised by the state. It is only through a critical recognition of the complex interplay between the jargons of authenticity and the social sources and modes of professional authority that an effective move beyond the present-day Indian historiography can begin.

The point is simple. There are pasts to which we do not have any access without some kind of training. For a sizeable section of the population, the discipline of history is the principal pedagogic mode of that access. In committing them to recollection of such pasts, it also takes pains to ensure that they do not go off the rails, that is to say, through history, memories are structured, organized

and circulated in sanctioned, authorized ways.

There are, at least two distinct levels of authorization: one can be called authenticity, primarily involving the members of the professional tribe, and the other authority, concerning the larger framework of the institutions and power relationships within which the tribe has to operate. Without reducing the correspondence between the two levels to a mechanistic and direct cause-and-effect connection, it is possible to appreciate the productivity of their relationship.

But what the liberal chimera of a 'pure' disinterested history often tends to forget is that there exist definite structural limits to our much trumpeted academic freedom of teaching and research and that these restrictions do not necessarily work in a spectacular way. Withdrawal of a couple of *Towards Freedom* volumes or closing down of a Kerala Council of Historical Research or deletion of a few passages from textbooks are not the only modes through which the discipline experiences state violence. There are subtler and everyday violations that simultaneously circumscribe and facilitate history's movement.

Let us consider an innocent example: the foundational categories of our textbook histories, namely, 'ancient India', 'medieval India' and 'modern India'.<sup>3</sup> These are certainly commonsensical devices, so commonsensical that one runs the risk of missing the role of the serious ideo-

1. These shorthand terms are in Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 122.

2. Apart from Keith Jenkins's more general discussion, Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The 'Objectivity Question' and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988) has discussed this point in the specific historical context of the United States.

3. These are not merely the titles of the state-sponsored National Council of Educational Research and Training textbooks, almost all the history departments in the country are organized along this line.

logical labour that goes into their making. For the majority of our historians (whether secularist or communalist), these are empty and matter of fact categories. As long as one does not define what one chooses to fill the categories with, we are told, the classification constitutes the mere form, not the content, of history.

I disagree. Precisely because the form has already announced the content. In forcing numerous pasts to pass through the grid of these categories, the historical discipline requires the children of families and of state to confirm to the produced memories of an always-already existing India that has stayed alive from the ancient through the medieval to the modern period. There might be competing and conflicting narratives, depending upon how one chooses to expend one's spleen, but by strategically locating itself as the *site*, rather than the *object*, of these narratives, India has come to be the degree zero which history not only starts from but also has to return to.<sup>4</sup>

This essay understands 'futures' not as an inevitable eon, which awaits us out there in the ineluctable sequence of linear time, but as moments that have to be actively created within the career of the discipline to escape the circularity of logic through which we have been taught to connect the pasts and the present. At this point it must be added that one cannot merely *historiographically* break out of this circle. The

4. It must be simultaneously clarified that this tautological structure is not peculiar to the Indian case. Since the nineteenth century, the principle of organizing human history along national lines has quite consistently functioned to methodically underplay the contingency of the modern regime of nation states. Among many historians and theorists of history who have dealt with the naturalization of the present through nationalization of the pasts, White deserves a condensed citation: 'Historiography is, by its very nature, the representational practice best suited to the production of

correspondence between authenticity and authority is too deep to be disrupted by a bare change in the narrative.

It would be utopian to conceptualize 'India' simply as a suppressive ideological frontier that shuts resistant pasts out of the professional imagination. India performs as an institutional and productive frontier too. In systematically encouraging production and circulation of a national history, the developmentalist post-colonial nation state has spawned a massive plexus of specialized establishments, conferences, grants and assignments.

These are not merely hotbeds of 'self-serving' cabals and coteries, as a narrowly repressive view of power might tempt us to believe.<sup>5</sup> No history is waiting for us outside of or prior to this network. The fact that the state is the chief author of the institutionalization and formalization of the historical studies does not mean that the authorial intention can fully realize itself in an absolute closure of the discipline.

History, in other words, is not a mere function of the state in spite of the latter's tremendous effort at instrumentalizing the discipline. Of course, the state substantially draws on the historians' aggressive faith in the complete interpretability of the

the "law-abiding" citizen. This is not because it may deal in patriotism, nationalism, or explicit moralizing but because in its featuring of narrativity as a favoured representational practice, it is especially well-suited to the production of notions of continuity, wholeness, closure, and individuality that every "civilized" society wishes to see itself as incarnating, against the chaos of a merely "natural" way of life.' Hayden White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 87.

5. Cf. Rudrangshu Mukherjee, 'Clio is an anarchist', *The Telegraph*, 26 February 2000.

pasts to bring a sense of finality and stability to the selfhood it claims to embody. But in order to produce that continuity and constancy, the historical discipline has to stabilize its own norms and rules, regularize its procedures of differentiating between the true and the false, the relevant and the extraneous, the fundamental and the ephemeral.<sup>6</sup>

Formalization of knowledge protocols performs a dual function: on the one hand, it helps history 'wear a face of regularity, order and coherence', thus rendering the pasts meaningful and mobilizable within the statist rhetoric; on the other hand, it specifies the ways in which such mobilization might occur and accordingly constrains its flexibility. Disciplined knowledges do not merely pursue but also violently inhibit and contest the fantasies of the state. This contestation works at the same time as a resistance and a corrective, as a challenge to the state and a stimulus to its enhancement. The history of the discipline, we must clarify, overlaps with the history of the state, but the two are not identical.

One can possibly see here the necessity of walking a difficult path between a homespun liberal foundationalism and an easy, vulgar Foucauldian relativism. The fiction of professional expertise and competence is constituted within the stabilization of discursive rules. By the use of the word 'fiction' I am not suggesting that the professional skill or methodology is only a bag of tricks, an empowered cluster of conventions and stereotypes. Rather the word simply insists that the claims of historians' authority make sense only within a code that is contingent – both in terms

6. Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language* (1969), trans., A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982).

of dependence and chanciness. While it is alarmingly lazy to say that the professional procedures are too arbitrary to handle the 'equally plausible fantasies between which we cannot make a rational choice,'<sup>7</sup> neither can we join the liberal historians in their unreflexive celebration of esoteric skill or utopian defence of the discipline's absolute autonomy.

**I**f in the context of the ongoing communalism controversy, it is disturbing to see the cavalier logic rapidly winning in the graduate coffeehouses of the metropolises, it is equally painful to witness the way the Marxist historians are echoing the Nehruvian groan about the 'infringement of the academic rights and freedom of the historian.' Even the Marxists, it seems, have expected the state to be disinterested, at least in the field of history. After reading *The God That Failed*, we might like to remember, as Edward Said remarked, 'I want to ask: Why as an intellectual did you believe in a god anyway?'<sup>8</sup>

Gods, believers know, retain their hold over us even when we go against them. The most modern of gods, the nation state, is no exception. In their bid to mobilize 'public opinion' against the open use of state power in 'rewriting' history, many secularist historians are smuggling in an old Nehruvian line of reasoning, which conveniently fails to disengage secularism from the residue of statism. This is connected to their enthusiastic participation in naturalization of the state ideology in the preceding decades.

At one level, there is an unmistakable evocation of the figure of the

essential nation (the sole point of disagreement being this is syncretic, not Hindu).<sup>9</sup> At another, there is an indiscreet valorization of the esotericism of an expert knowledge,<sup>10</sup> happily forgetting that the myth of a self-perpetuating expertise only serves to repress the material context of the professional practice and gives it a corona of ideality and disinterestedness.

I am not suggesting a false binary between a liberating dilettantism and an oppressive professionalism. My argument is that if we do not qualify the autonomy of the discipline as strategic (not absolute), then we run the risk of sliding back into the naïve objectivism that the state has always tried to establish through history ('this is the right way to know the past of the nation'). As a theorized project of knowledge production history must remain contestable, refuse to pretend closure, and open itself internally to the play of contending interpretations.

**I**t must be clear by now that this is neither to justify the recurrent premeditated state violence against specified secularist historians, institutions and texts nor to overplay the element of 'purely interpretative difference' in the debate. What is important to note is that the Hindutva preachers, like the Holocaust deniers, are increasingly trying to establish their claims *within* the dis-

cipline of history, professing allegiance to the 'facts' and methodologies of research. We shall be mistaken to think that since this evidently – and I am tempted to add, fittingly – subjects them to scathing professional criticism, we can continue to believe in an uncompromising expertise operating independently of the traffic between the profession and its principal patron.

**E**ven if stabilized rules, for the moment, resist untried fantasies, this stability is not a transcendental given; it is a product of decades of professional labour within the structure of patronage, a fiction intelligible and convincing only within the language of political investment.<sup>11</sup> Unless chained down, to rephrase Plato, the beautiful statues of Daedalus might indeed begin to fly in the night.

The success of the communalists lies less in the fact that they have received the official green signal to 'rewrite' the national history than in the suggestion that they have compelled the secularist professionals to shrink back to an insular definition of history: as if textbooks are pristine, preideological sites; as if it is only a government, not the state, that the discipline needs to rethink its relationship with; as if invocation of a politically deactivated scientificity can effectively answer the blatant trampling of evidences. The state has made us unlearn that we can defend secularism without naturalizing it.

Such a defence against the effacement of human labour, on this

7. Mary Fulbrook, 'Fact, Fantasy, and German History', *Bulletin of the German Historical Institute Washington*, 26, Spring 2000.

8. Edward W. Said, *Representations of the Intellectual: The 1993 Reith Lectures* (London: Vintage, 1994), 84.

9. Consider, for example, Irfan Habib's solemn statement on the ICHR controversy which closes with the following lines: 'One does not have in mind only the honor of the National Movement, or the cause of academic freedom. The battle is for the nation's mind, and that concerns the future of us all' <[www.ercwil.com.net/indowindow/sad/](http://www.ercwil.com.net/indowindow/sad/)>. However, it needs to be emphasized that in his latest book, *Beyond Nationalist Frames: Relocating Postmodernism, Hindutva, History* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2002), Sumit Sarkar has determinedly polemicized against secularist preoccupation with the national.

10. Reference to 'eminence' and 'stature' of the assaulted secularist historians is a usual rhetorical ploy. See Habib's statement.

11. I think Foucault is acutely pertinent here: 'The essential political problem for the intellectual is not to criticize the ideological contents supposedly linked to science, or to ensure that his own scientific practice is accompanied by a correct ideology, but that of ascertaining the possibility of constituting a new politics of truth.' Michel Foucault, 'Truth and Power', *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*, Colin Gordon ed. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 133.

reading, has to be crucially set against the institutive violence of capital. It is from its location and configuration within the regime of global capital that the nation state accumulates its potency of naturalization. Imagining 'futures' as simply postnational and postdisciplinary without specifying this connection not only inhibits the critical scope of the contention but also threatens to obscure the present international division of intellectual labour.<sup>12</sup>

**T**he ever increasing preference of the post-liberalization academic generation in metropolitan India to research in the history and South Asian studies departments of the western (chiefly American) universities is structured within this division. Read within the event of impressive transnational success of the *Subaltern Studies* series (which has inaugurated a critique of the interconstitutive connection of nation state and history without always exposing itself to a trenchant introspection in similar situational terms), this unequal circulation between metropole and periphery is gestural of the profundity of the politics of producing 'postcolonial native informants'.<sup>13</sup>

At issue here is not so much a nostalgic-nationalist emotionalism around 'brain drain' as the overdetermination of the historical discipline

itself. Within the domesticating folds of the first world academia the critique of the national in the historiographical threatens to operate as a discursive correlate of multinational capital, the critique of empiricist objectivism begins to contribute to increased (ex)portability of the abstracted local, the critique of teleology works to impede translation of histories into transformational politics. Commitment to the discipline, in whose name this new professionalization operates, turns out to be premised on an indifference to the exploitative nature of the globally hierarchized system of knowledge production.

**T**o embroider upon the previous sentence, India does not form a stable unified pole in this hierarchization, tragically receiving the brunt of globalization of academia and privatization of theory. Rather, as the widening chasm between metropolitan and mofussil histories in the country suggests, the economy of memory cannot be monitored evenly at all points.<sup>14</sup> The academic map of India, those who inhabit it know, is deeply fractured along multiple but overlapping axes of privileges. Surviving under the aegis of an enthusiastic collaborator 'postcolonial' state which increasingly constrains its citizens' access to academic opportunities, we need to be sensitive to the political investments in professional standards of sophistication. Erasing the small town intellectual productions out of the respectable academic discourse, or better still, dismissing them as 'substandard', 'conventional' and 'unscientific' restores an odour of modularity to metropolitan high theory.

14. Partha Chatterjee, 'History and the Domain of the Popular', *Seminar* 522 (February 2003), 31-34 unambiguously recognizes this point. But his prescription of bilingualism for the high academicians appears as a quick formalist exit from the complexities of 'opening up to, as well as confronting, the popular.'

With the unstated agreement over the idea that the 'regional identities' are somewhat less real and stable than 'the national', the 'local histories' are conveniently appropriated within the high discourse as inadequate but useful pointers to locate underworked areas of research, spot unused sources and know little facts, which can then be scraped, gleaned and carried to the big city seminars. Globe trotting native informants need situated native informants. It is this material hierarchy of production of historical data that underwrites much of today's well-meaning research and our imagination of 'futures' cannot elude an intervention at this point. To be able to write, in other words, we must move beyond writing.

'Beyond' returns us to the odd word in the title: 'post-Indian'. 'Post-' is 'the trope of our times', we are told. 'For there is a sense of disorientation, a disturbance of direction, in the 'beyond': an exploratory, restless movement'<sup>15</sup> that we must keep alive in order to unsettle the serenity of received categories. It reflects, does not resolve, the crisis of confidence in the foundational fictions. At the risk of being taxed with an absurd imprecision, it sustains our suspicions of producing programmed histories. Absurd, because 'post-' also reduces the imagined histories to 'prepositional time':<sup>16</sup> the frontiers of 'Indian history', which they try to spill over, cross and indeed shift, continue to govern their problematic. And they are not ashamed either. 'When no known language is available to you, you must determine to steal a language — as men used to steal a loaf of bread.'<sup>17</sup>

15. Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 1.

16. This phrase occurs in the context of the postcolonial in Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 11.

17. *Roland Barthes* by Roland Barthes trans. Richard Howard (London: Macmillan, 1975), 176.

12. Sumit Sarkar raises this point about the postnational. *Beyond Nationalist Frames*, 187 and *passim*. In his 'critique of the privatization of theory and the de-politicization of pedagogy' Adam Katz points out how "post-disciplinarity" corresponds to the postmodern liberal politics of identity, which requires modes of knowledge "flexible" enough to manage the contradictions of post-welfare state capitalism." Adam Katz, 'Postmodern Cultural Studies: A Critique', *Cultural Logic*, 1: 1 (Fall 1997).

13. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Calcutta: Seagull, 1999), 360-4 and *passim*.

# Queer people and the law

ARVIND NARRAIN

WHEN the word queer is used in the Indian context, it signifies lives which challenge the heterosexual norm, i.e. that the only valid way of sexually/romantically relating to one another is within the framework of either marriage or a heterosexual relationship. It includes the gay man cruising in a public park, the transgender person changing her name from Sanjay to Sanjana and living in society with her new identity, the two brave women who decide that they are going to live with each other regardless of societal disapproval.

While 'queer' stands for stories of resilience and bravery it also signifies violence and hatred which have severely brutalized and in some cases broken the resistance of the 'queer'. There is thus the college student who attempts suicide because he feels he is alone in his shameful perverted homosexual desire and hence feels worthless in the eyes of God, his family and wider society, the lesbians who consume poison because society will not allow them to live together, and the hijra who is subject to brutal and repeated rape by the police.

In the last decade we have begun to hear more about the 'queer', both the celebration and the defiance as well as the relentless smothering of yet another life by the brutality of an order which cannot tolerate these forms of 'defiant desire'. This essay is dedicated to the memory of one such per-

son who embodied the defiance and the celebration, Nishit Saran, a talented gay filmmaker who died at the young age of 26. Nishit's most memorable work was a documentary entitled *Summer in my Veins* in which he filmed his 'coming out' to his mother as gay.

Watching the documentary and witnessing this incredible act of courage and political commitment was a great sense of affirmation to many of us who identify as queer. At a personal level, Nishit's public sharing of an intensely personal experience made it possible for me to raise the issue of my being gay to my family. At a wider level, I know that wherever the documentary has been screened it has helped numerous young people to be more comfortable with their homosexuality and also created space for a public discourse on being queer as a lifestyle as well as an erotics and a politics.

I will examine the struggles of the queer community with the law from the perspective of a movement which, much like Nishit Saran's documentary, is still 'coming out'. It is a newcomer, compared to the more established activism of dalits and women and environment. Its 'legitimacy' is still not clear even as queer people try to claim a place among the communities of suffering. While some spaces have opened out, we are still liable to be dismissed as advocating a personal choice or a lifestyle



issue at best or a perversion or deviation at worst.

As an activist friend put it, 'More often than not, the abuse suffered by these subaltern sexual cultures has been made invisible even by the activist community using a convoluted logic that arrogates to itself the ability to calibrate pain. First comes class, then comes caste, then come gender, ecology and so on. If there is any space left on this ark of suffering, then sexuality is included as a humble cabin boy. There is no hope of the last being the first in this inheritance of the meek.'

**W**hen I use the word queer my explicit concern is to put on board the fact that we are talking about a new kind of politics—a politics which takes seriously the violence suffered by gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people and which looks at ways to combat this violence. At a basic level we are talking about rights—the right to love persons of our choice regardless of gender or sexual orientation, the right to be free of violence, the right not to be discriminated against and, most importantly, the right to life itself. At another more fundamental level we are talking about the freedom to create a different kind of world, a world which is not governed by the constrictive framework of heterosexism and patriarchy.

There is a revolutionary prospect in a queer project wherein institutions such as marriage are questioned and other more democratic ways of relating envisaged. Such indeed is the vision of a queer politics, which changes the way we see ourselves and our sexual desires and our ways of relating to each other. Can our politics question the normativity of marriage, the inevitability of procreation and the necessity of monogamy? Can we create spaces through our questions for

women's expression of their sexuality or for a greater diversity in people's lives? Can this movement counterpose increasing authoritarianism with greater democracy as well as struggle against the attempt to sacrifice the lives of those infected with Hiv/Aids at the altar of profits?

**Q**ueer people are newcomers to the language of rights itself. The language of 'universal' rights excluded one kind of people who were never deemed worthy of possessing rights. The most poignant example of this exclusion is the status of queer people as 'victims' of the Nazi holocaust. Even in this brotherhood of the oppressed, the thousands of homosexual men prosecuted and killed by Nazi Germany were denied the victimhood that was the inheritance of the people of Israel.

The memory of the loss of the Jewish people and culture is insistently commemorated through the Holocaust Museum, as well as in the poetry and literature of the post holocaust period through powerful writers such as Elie Wiesel and Primo Levi. What stands almost obliterated as a memory is the persecution of men with the Pink Triangle (homosexuals were made to wear the pink triangle just as the Jews wore the yellow star) and the Nazi destruction of the first modern gay subculture in the world.

Human rights law is a product of this way of remembering the past. The silence is deafening. The non-discrimination clauses do not even refer to the category of those who have been victims of persecution on grounds of their sexual orientation and gender identity.

However, the interesting thing about rights language is its strange vulnerability to appropriation. Histories of natural rights theory insist on its originary link to authoritarianism

as well as to the protection of private property. At various points in time women, indigenous people and black people were excluded from the possibility of being rights bearing subjects. It is strange that the same rights, which have been complicit in the practices of exclusion, can today speak to power about the moral imperative of inclusion.

This was precisely what happened in the case of the struggle against apartheid in South Africa and segregation and slavery in the USA, to cite just two examples. However, one also needs to be acutely conscious of how rights language is vulnerable to appropriation by the interests of multinational capital, fashioning what Upendra Baxi calls 'trade related market friendly human rights.'

The rise of the gay, lesbian liberation movement and the emerging global articulation has resulted in an appropriation of human rights law to defend those who were victimized on grounds of their sexuality. Post the historic complaint by Tasmanian activist Nick Toonen to the Human Rights Committee, universal human rights are now being read to include the concerns of queer people.

**T**oday rights language is being used in many parts of the world to make power accountable and as a way of questioning the violence to which queer people are subject to. In many parts of the world there is growing recognition of the necessity for non-discrimination in employment and education, for partnership rights for homosexual couples as well as the rights of gay adoption. Rights language has become the new language in which queer suffering is articulated and remedies are fashioned.

One of the remarkable victories fashioned through rights language has been the South African Constitu-



tion which, in its non-discrimination clause, embodies the category of sexual orientation making South Africa the first country in the world to prohibit discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation. The South African Constitution was a product of a liberation struggle in which black, socialist and gay/lesbian people participated and when the time came to make a new beginning an attempt was made to include all minorities. It is due largely to the courage of those who were in the anti-apartheid movement and still identified themselves on the basis of a queer identity that we had the first democratic revolution in which queer people were taken to be equal citizens with their heterosexual compatriots.

**T**he story of Simon Nkoli, an anti-apartheid activist who was gay is illustrative. As he put it, 'There are lots of gay activists involved in political organizations. But because of the pressure put upon the gay and lesbian community we are afraid to come out. What will people think if they know I am a gay person? I better fight against apartheid in a hidden way. The danger is when South Africa is liberated, we as gay people will never seem to have taken part in liberating our people.'

However, this increasing appropriation of rights language still faces formidable difficulties. Queer people worldwide are still subject to a high degree of violence and discrimination with the violence itself getting linked to other global discourses viz. the discourse of homosexuality as a western disease. In many African countries such as Namibia, Kenya and Zimbabwe, queer people are linked to the 'West' and seen as the embodiment of a 'western disease'. Mugabe of Zimbabwe has been particularly adept in using gay/lesbian people of Zimbabwe as a scapegoat for the many fail-

ings of the post-colonial Zimbabwean state. The backlash against the authoritarianism of his one-party state and his failure in ensuring that the people have access to the basics of human existence including clean drinking water, healthcare and education is sought to be deflected on the new enemy, the gays and lesbians of Zimbabwe. In public speeches Mugabe derides gays and lesbians as worse than 'pigs and dogs'.

This kind of rhetoric conflating gays and lesbians with the 'enemy' is an emergent discourse in many parts of the developing world. Right from Daniel Arap Moi in Kenya, Nujoma in Namibia, Mahatir in Malaysia to aspiring nationalist leaders like Pat Buchanan in the USA and Bal Thackeray back home, stigmatising queer desire seems to be an essential part of the nation building project. Nation states are built upon the bodies of stigmatised others and queer sexuality is particularly vulnerable to being perceived as the 'other', regardless of its often indigenous status.

Universal human rights language is today vulnerable to the challenge of being culturally insensitive. The rights of queer people are seen as embodying a western discourse, thereby not particularly relevant in the context of a developing country. This issue of 'relevance' needs to be answered from the point of view of people in the developing countries.

**T**he concept of 'culture' itself is a contested one; when one speaks from the standpoint of Indian culture it is not entirely clear if one can represent the whole culture. The contested nature of culture inevitably means there are many positions within 'Indian culture' with no one viewpoint capable of representing that 'culture' fully.

The politics of representation means that it is usually the more

powerful who end up speaking for the less powerful and oftentimes represent a diverse and plural culture as a monolithic one. The right wing often mobilizes the concept of 'culture' to represent 'tradition' with works like the Ramayana and Mahabharata and temple sculptures as well as living practices such as arranged marriage, thread ceremonies, child marriage and sati. What is rigorously left out of this definition of culture is the queer face of tradition (as documented by Ruth Vanita and Salim Kidwai in their recent book, *History of Same Sex Love in India*) as well as the living practices of traditional communities such as hijras alongside modern communities such as the gay/lesbian, bisexual and transgender community. Thus the concept of 'culture' that is mobilized is built upon an exclusion of queer artefacts as well as non-recognition of the living cultures of queer people.

It is the above which provides the strongest rebuttal to the notion of queer rights being a western disease – a careful drawing of a narrative that traces the queer as a part of 'our' history and embodying a set of practices which exist at times unacknowledged, at others hidden, at yet others struggling to become 'visible'. In more simple terms, queer rights is an issue for Indians because there are queer traditions, queer practices and queer people in India and rights language is one mode of making this history visible.

**H**uman rights language in the Indian context emerged as a part of the apparatus of the post-colonial nation state embedded in its constitutional structure. However, it is only the real struggles of people which convert human rights from a constitutional text to a living reality. What Baxi terms as 'human rights realism' is his understanding that the histories of human

rights are made not in drafting chambers but in the day to day struggles of ordinary people and communities. The histories of human rights in India are linked to the struggles against the Emergency, the resistance to custodial deaths of Naxalites by human rights groups, the Dalit articulation against upper caste violation, grassroots environmental movements opposing big dams as well as the women's movement taking up rape as a human rights violation. The above, of course, is more illustrative than exhaustive. All these struggles through their strong articulation, both give 'life' to an otherwise 'bureaucratized' notion of constitutional rights as well as invent new forms of rights.

**I**n India it is only in the last 20 years that queer issues have begun to be articulated, and in the stories of ordinary people. One such beginning was in 1988, when two women, Leela and Urmila, living in a small town in Madhya Pradesh decided that they wanted to live together with societal acceptance and hence got married. This challenge to the heterosexist institution of marriage did not go unchallenged as it provoked a vigorous backlash resulting in their separation. However, this narrative of 'individual courage' provoked women living in urban contexts to start talking about the issue of lesbian and gay rights. Similarly, the police harassment to which gay/bisexual men are subject to resulted in the first organized protest against police violence against gays in 1993 in Delhi.

Since these early beginnings we have seen an emerging collective organization in most of the larger cities in India with violence and discrimination being seen not as a part of the natural order of things but instead, something which had to be questioned. The excesses of the state

are gradually being questioned as seen in the protests over the banning of the film *Fire* as well as the protests over the arrest of Hiv/Aids workers in Lucknow for violating the anti sodomy law (Sec 377 of the Indian Penal Code).

These questions are being backed up by an effort to document the nature and history of violence against queer people. Both the Humjinsi resource book on gay, lesbian and bisexual rights as well as the People's Union for Civil Liberties (PUCL-K) report on 'Human rights violations against sexual minorities in India' are examples of this kind of documentation.

The question remains as to how far this appropriation of rights will be allowed to advance. The recent petition in the Delhi High Court which asks for a reading down of the provision criminalizing 'carnal intercourse against the order of nature' may well be an important moment in determining whether or not citizenship will continue to be understood within a heterosexist framework.

**T**hough queer right issues have begun to be articulated, the challenges are still immense. In a sense the challenge still facing activists is to make sexuality a serious human rights concern. Towards this the evidence of discrimination and violence needs to move from the anecdotal and be systematically documented, so that the state and society confront in no uncertain terms the systemic violence which queer people are subject to. In a phrase popularised by Upendra Baxi, it is the 'little undone and the vast undone' that confronts queer activists. The greatest tribute we can pay Nishit Saran is to bridge the abyss by committed and sustained activism questioning compulsory heterosexuality as the only valid way of life.

# From resistance to governance

RITAMBHARA HEBBAR

TRIBAL politics in India, by and large, can be described as the politics of resistance, a long drawn out struggle against the violation of tribal rights on water, forest and land (*jal, jungle aur zamin*) by state sponsored activities and private interests (Singh ed. 1972, 1983).<sup>1</sup> Though diverse in its articulation of resistance, the distinguishing feature of these struggles has been towards advancing a critique to the modern, scientific management of natural resources. It is this what sets these struggles apart from other movements demanding statehood and special privileges for the original inhabitants of the land.<sup>2</sup>

1. Xaxa (2001) argues that the struggle for empowerment among tribes was a response to the process of disempowerment of tribes unlike, for example, the resistance movements among scheduled castes wherein they sought redress from an age-old oppressive system.

With the formation of Jharkhand, there seems to be an interlude in the relatively uninterrupted tribal situation in the country.<sup>3</sup> The tribes of south Bihar have been granted their own state and, supposedly, with it the right to govern themselves. Is this the beginning of a new phase of governance in the area and an attempt at translating into practice the alternative vision of the movement on natural resource management? Or is it more a co-opting of tribes into the main-

2. Here I refer to movements popularly known as the sons of the soil movements that sought to campaign for rights and privileges for the locals as against migrant communities.

3. Jharkhand or the 'land of forests' is one of the most resource rich areas in the country. An equally rich cultural mosaic matches the diversity of its topography. It is home to over 20 tribes; predominant among them are the Munda, Santhal, Ho and the Kharia.

stream by offering them a state of their own?

Jharkhand was officially recognized as the 28th state of the Indian Union on 15 November 2000, the birth anniversary of Birsa Munda, the forebearer and inspiration of the Jharkhand movement. The formation of the state marks the end of a political phase in the area. With the formation of Jharkhand, although a clipped version as envisioned by the movement,<sup>4</sup> the foremost demand of the Jharkhand movement was accomplished. Present day Jharkhand corresponds to the map drawn by the Bharatiya Janata Party for Vanaanchal, comprising of the tribal districts of south Bihar. However, there is some uncertainty whether the other major aspirations and demands of the movement have been accommodated by the formation of the state. Was state creation a realization of the aspirations of what the movement strove for is the question I explore in this paper.

To most in Jharkhand, a legitimate, official 'Jharkhandi' identity as against the much-disparaged one of a 'Bihari' was enough reason to celebrate and rejoice (Roy 2000). But labels reveal more than they conceal or cover up as categories of thought and politics. An identity that one can call one's own, however prescribed and ceremonial, beckoned their arrival as full-fledged citizens within the Indian Union in place of pictorial depictions of 'other cultures' in the census supplements of Bihar to demonstrate the presence of a people with strange costumes and stranger manners. The celebration upon gaining a separate and independent *Jharkhandi* label vindicated their

aspirations for the area and as a people. However, many dithered from celebrating, unsure whether the formation of Jharkhand was an answer to their prayers and expectations or the beginning of another round of haggling with the authorities for all those provisions of civil existence that should come naturally to a people as citizens and rightful members of a nation (Krishna 2000).

To many observers and onlookers, the formation of the state sent mixed signals. The exhilaration around the formation of Jharkhand was accompanied by strikes and protests in Delhi as well as in Jharkhand by political and social activists on the politics that ensued over the formation of government in the state. A number of discussions were organized to discuss the fate of Jharkhand under a right wing chief minister and government. Many activists and political leaders belonging to the Jharkhand parties of various denominations felt cheated of their toehold in politics. They were suddenly divested of their contribution to the long struggle that paved the way for the formation of Jharkhand. And with it, many of the issues central to the movement were forgotten.

The slighting of some prominent political leaders of the movement was as much a result of their own doing or undoing as it was a consequence of the rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) as an important party in the area.<sup>5</sup> For those informed about the politics of the area, the BJP's ascendance to power came as no surprise. However, the shenanigans that accompanied the politics around the chief ministerial birth raised doubts about the commitment to the welfare

of its people and the area. In effect, it put a question mark on a number of objectives around which the movement had sustained itself over half a century that the creation of Jharkhand sought to achieve.

The cynicism with the politics that accompanied the formation of the state was reflected publicly and without reserve. Soon after the formation of Jharkhand, a prominent human rights organization in the area came out with what it termed as a People's Agenda (BIRSA 2000, ii):

'We have finally got the Jharkhand state, but what we have got is only a physical layout of the same. If we ask ourselves the question as to *who* controls the lives of people within this physical area, then in order to give an honest answer we would have to admit that the controls are not in the hands of the Jharkhandi people.

'At the economic level, outsiders and non-tribes, industrialists, merchants, traders, mine-owners, government employees and contractors own our waters, forests and lands as well as our mineral resources. At the political level, it is sad that a communal party is the strongest party in Jharkhand and it seems that it is going to be the ruling party of the state... the cause for worry is that in the 50 years of the struggle, Jharkhand movement has become a leaders' movement and because of this some of our leaders have had a taste of political posts and money and taken advantage of the people. Therefore, the people of Jharkhand are faced by a difficult task of converting the Jharkhand movement from being a leaders' movement to a people's movement.'

Clearly, statehood was not seen as an affirmation of self-rule or autonomy. Basic to this realization are issues revolving around the control and management of *jal, jungle* and *zamin*.

4. The proposed map of Jharkhand envisaged by the movement corresponded to the geological extent of the Chotanagpur plateau and consisted of the tribal districts of Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, West Bengal and Orissa.

5. Arya (1998) attributes Jharkhand parties' diminishing influence in the area in the last few years to its inability to systematically take up agrarian issues in the region.

Most importantly, it was an appeal towards decentralizing these concerns to the people themselves in order to find possible solutions to gaining control over their waters, forests and lands and thereby over their lives. This appeal was a tacit apology for deviating from the very basis of the movement. It was simultaneously an appeal to the people to prepare for another phase of collective action to ascertain self-rule, a going back to the basic issue that the movement began with in seeking the support of the people in the struggle. However, this time round, the movement faces greater cynicism.

**W**hat is the People's Agenda? The organization seeks to answer this question in its declaration by listing a set of instructions in the form of *dos* and *don'ts* for the newly formed government. One of its demands is to reserve the post of chief minister and his deputy for tribes people; also that all government workers who come in direct contact with the people should be locals and belong to a tribal group of the area. Second, tribal land should be restored and the leases of mines in the area should be taken away from non-tribes and given to local tribal groups. Third, the government should put an end to displacing people, especially through dam projects. Fourth, sincere efforts should be made to end corruption in government. The fifth demand is to constitute a special committee consisting of leaders of the Jharkhand movement, intellectuals, representatives from minority communities and weaker sections of society such as women and scheduled castes. This committee would oversee government working and ensure that the interests of the weaker sections of the society are not compromised by the state.

The activists also distinguish between a Vanaanchal perspective of

self-rule, which is also synonymous with a modern and a *diku* (outsider) perspective, as against that of Jharkhand. The former is based on the exploitation of nature and believes in the values of individualism, competition and profit maximization, materialism and self-aggrandizement. The latter, on the other hand, is based on a respect for nature, communitarianism, sharing, consensus and believes in the philosophy that there is a limit to self-aggrandizement as beyond a point it amounts to exploiting other persons and beings in nature.

The creation of Jharkhand on the lines of a proposed Vanaanchal was seen as the realization of *diku* aspirations in the area. The activists use the term *diku*, to refer to industrialists, traders, merchants and government employees or as they put it, 'the category of oppressors who are not a part of the movement and are responsible for pushing the people and their traditions and habitats to the periphery' (ibid. 2). In this light, the creation of the present state of Jharkhand may well be seen as an attempt to thwart the struggle towards self-rule.

**W**ith the formation of Jharkhand, the local tribes feel outnumbered, being a minority within Jharkhand. According to the 1991 census, tribes constitute only 28% of the population within Jharkhand. Some in the movement attribute it to the census procedures, wherein there was no accounting of tribes practicing *Sarna*, or their ancient religion, as against those who have taken to Hinduism or converted to Islam or Christianity. This they feel is a purposeful move to alienate tribes from their own culture and region. Likewise, there are 14 Lok Sabha seats in Jharkhand of which only five are reserved for scheduled areas; the other nine seats are available to non-tribes for contesting elections. Corre-

spondingly, of 81 Vidhan Sabha or Jharkhand State Legislative Assembly seats, only 28 are reserved for tribes. Consequently, the tribals find themselves under-represented in the two houses and therefore do not see the possibility of their visions vis-à-vis the area and the people crystallizing into state practices (Prakash Louis 2000).

**T**he fundamental point of altercation, it seems, is the issue of under-representation of tribes in the new political milieu as well as the fear of being sequestered of their lands and forests by the *diku*. It is worth mentioning here that the performance of the Jharkhand parties in the reserved constituencies over the past couple of decades has not been promising. It has seen a decline in their reputation as parties representing local tribes in the area, partly as a result of floating from one party to another.<sup>6</sup>

Also, Jharkhand parties have sought alliances in almost all Lok Sabha and assembly elections. Their association with various national parties such as the Congress, Janata Party and the Communist Party of India around elections has confused the electorate about their locus standi vis-à-vis their long-term political ambitions for the area (Ghosh 1989). The 1990s marked a significant change in Jharkhand, wherein the Bharatiya Janata Party emerged as the leading party in tribal Bihar. Thus, besides pondering over the dynamics of numbers in the newly formed state, the Jharkhand leaders need to consider the ascendance of *diku* parties and objectives in seats apparently set aside for tribes.

6. Bagun Sumbrui is known to have changed parties once during the 1977 Lok Sabha election when he joined the Janata Party and, then again, in the 1980s when he shifted to the ruling Congress.

The situation then is no different with the formation of the state. In fact, the movement has woken up to the reality of Jharkhand; it is no longer the supposedly 'uncorrupted' world of tribes. The demographic shift in the area was also accompanied by a diversification of tribal life in the area. The demographic shift is not a recent phenomenon and nor is it a problem associated only with the census operations. As early as 1962, Roy Choudhury stated (*ibid.* 19):

'The tempo of the rapid increase of Bihar's population is going to be accelerated by the programme of industrialization that has been taken up in various parts of the state and particularly in Chotanagpur... In 1961 census there has been a tremendous increase of about 21% in the overall population due to natural accretion, further resettlement of displaced persons, setting up of new industrial zones etc. In 1971 census there may be another 20% increase, as the effects of the newly started family planning move is likely to be set off by a more industrialization in a few belts.<sup>7</sup> This overall increase of the population will mean that by 1975 the demand on Bihar's forestry will be almost double... No ordinary afforestation programme is likely to be able to cope with the increased pressure on forests unless there is a well-planned regimentation.'

**E**vidently, an increase in the Chotanagpur population also put pressure on forests and lands that further put aside the rights of local tribes to fulfil the exigencies of the state. It was this resolve to change the face of Chotanagpur that spelt disaster for the local tribes. The movement had consist-

ently campaigned against the processes of industrialization as well as construction of big dams, which were the main cause for displacement of people in the area. It demanded a separate state in the hope of restoring the rights of tribes to their lands, waters and forests. The formation of Jharkhand has not altered the equation between the state and the demands of the movement. The new state has made explicit its commitment to industrialize Jharkhand and open the countryside to commercial investment (annual report on Jharkhand state economy 2001, Government of Jharkhand).<sup>8</sup> If the policy pronouncements are any indication of the state's plans for Jharkhand, the future of tribes in the region will not be any different from their previous experiences with the state of Bihar and the Indian Union.

**T**he recent legislation on political decentralization or The Panchayat (extension to the Scheduled Areas) Act 1996 does not help matters. Though it claims to devolve financial and executive powers to the village level through its four-tier system of decentralized administration, certain features qualify both these powers.<sup>9</sup> According to the Parliamentary Report that lists the finer details of this process of decentralization, a large part of the panchayat funds would accrue from the collections of state governments in the form of taxes, tolls, and duties and from the Consolidated Fund of India as grants-in-aid to the

state governments. The State Finance Commission as a financial award to the panchayat system would devolve a certain portion of the funds. Only an insignificant part of the funds would be collected through the system.

**I**n addition, the funds have been divided into two categories: the charged and the voted.<sup>10</sup> The intention behind this division is that once a part of the funds is placed in the 'charged' category, it would be spent for the purpose listed in the budget brought out by the intermediate panchayat (subject to conditions prescribed by the additional deputy commissioner) and approved by the autonomous district council. In so doing, subjects under the 'charged' category are decided in the processes of decentralization and not through approval of the people. Both these powers are paraphrased so as to accommodate issues of national and development interests of the country. The panchayats do not have the power to overrule or question state imperatives or interests in the area. In fact, as decentralized structures of the state, the panchayats would be bound institutionally to implement government programmes and policies irrespective of whether they find favour with the local people. The legislation thereby reintroduces the same points of discord between the movement and the state.<sup>11</sup>

10. The Bhuria Committee report does not spell out the subjects listed in the voted category. The charged category includes subjects such as education, health and development.

11. The experiences of Madhya Pradesh in scheduled areas with the Panchayat Raj Act 1996 have not been encouraging. The gram sabha or the village assembly, as the lowest unit of administration, has not only failed to involve people in the decision-making processes, but panchayat raj has slowly turned into 'sarpanch raj' or rule by a dominant few. The gram sabha has been reduced to a body intended for implementing government programmes in the villages (Singh 2002).

7. A large numbers of Bangladeshi refugees were settled in Chotanagpur following the India-Pakistan war.

8. The Jharkhand government has recently granted Rs 10 crore to the India Tourism Development Corporation (ITDC) to develop tourism in the state (TOI News Watch, 19 October 2002).

9. The four units are the village assembly (gram sabha), gram panchayat (a council of five members representing the village), the intermediate panchayat and the autonomous district council.

The All India Conference of Women Organizations working at the grassroots in Ranchi in 1997 could not have brought this tension out more clearly. The conference was fully represented by organizations from Jharkhand such as Jharkhand Mahila Sangharsh Samiti based in Ranchi, Shramjivi Mahila Samiti (Jamshedpur), Mahila Samakhya (Ranchi), Badlav (Dumka), Visthapit Sanghatan Sangh (Ichagarh), Nari Mukti Vahini (Palamau), Aqua (Giridih), Sanyukt Mahila Samiti (West Singhbhum) and Koel-Karo Jan Sanghatan (West and East Singhbhum), especially in the session organized around issues of displacement and related issues of compensation and rehabilitation.

**S**ome of the major issues raised by these organizations were regarding their resentment over irrigation projects (Ichagarh dam and the Koel-Karo dam project), field firing ranges (Netrahaat field firing range), bauxite mines and white stone factories (in Palamau and West Singhbhum), abuse of women workers in brick kilns and coal mines spread all over Jharkhand and out migration of women of the area and their initiation into the illicit profession of flesh trade. The large turnout of women and of organizations working on issues of displacement in this session not only brought to light the gravity of the problem of alienation of forests and lands from the people of the area, but also the desperation of the locals over the state of affairs.

Though the Jharkhand movement has moved away from its earlier stance of resistance, it still subscribes to an archetype 'borrowed' from the nation-builders of tribes vs. non-tribes, isolation vs. integration, uncorrupted tribal way of life vs. the exploitative outsider, which has only served as a screen against the industrial and commercial misuse of the area. This arche-

type methodically dissociated the concerns of 'culture' from 'nature' or the management of natural resources, wherein protecting tribal culture was restricted to ensuring the survival of tribal arts and crafts. As begetters and products of a specific economic and symbolic relationship with lands and forests, arts and crafts were dissociated from the latter and reduced to becoming mere exhibits of tribal heritage of India.

**T**he classic instance would be that of *Panchsheel* or the five principles advocated by Nehru in the administration of the northeast tribes, which purportedly expressed the spirit of administration in all tribal areas in India. The emphasis was on *protecting* tribal rights on lands and forests and *allowing* tribes to develop on their own terms. However, Panchsheel was in disagreement with the policy of industrialization for the rest of India. Since tribal areas are also the most resource rich areas, the process of industrialization was brazen with regard to tribal rights on land water and forests (Arya 1998, Das 1992, Lorduswamy 1997, Singh 1972).

The debate initiated at the time of independence over the future of tribes in India between the integrationists vs. the isolationists still holds ground after all these years. The debate between Verrier Elwin (1955) and G.S. Ghurye (1963) has outlived the protagonists wherein the latter built a case of incorporating tribes into the mainstream and created the infamous contraction for tribes as 'backward Hindus'. Elwin (1955) on the other hand was in favour of protecting tribes from the mainstream, thereby preserving the 'tribal way of life' from the ills of 'civilization'. His contribution to the tribal experience could well be in popularizing the notion of a 'tribal way of life', a homogeneous, roman-

tic construct of 'innocent' and 'primitive' tribesmen, women and children set in pristine environs, cut off from civilization. A picture so perfect that the legitimacy of tribes in India depended on whether they fitted into this etched out portrait of a 'tribal way of life'.

**I**n either case, the tribes were reduced to the 'primitive other' and have since been subjected to a time warp, which fails to accommodate the diversity in tribal life and experience over time. The Jharkhandi vs. Vanaanchal perspective recalls the isolation vs. integration debate on the future of tribes in India. It reinstates the divide between tribe and non-tribe around the same dichotomies of innocent vs. shrewd, communitarian vs. individualistic and nature vs. culture. This encourages a politics that is not only insular, but also self-defeating. Both the movement and its adversaries oscillate between the same binary logic on tribes with neither focusing on the substantive issues of governance and culture that confront tribes at this critical juncture presented in the creation of Jharkhand.

It is clear with the formation of Jharkhand that there can be no political solutions to cultural questions, that is, a political enclave will not ensure cultural autonomy or economic entitlement. And any meaningful deliberation on the issue of autonomy will only be possible if the movement unlearns the terms of the current debate on tribes. First, it has to acknowledge the diversification of tribal life in its politics. Concomitantly, it must seriously deliberate upon what constitutes the 'tribal self/selves' and in the process seek direction on the future of governance vis-à-vis people and natural resources in Jharkhand. The revivification of tribal politics practiced by the nation-builders is a matter of con-

cern as it casts doubts over the future of tribes in India. Will tribal politics in India ever be able to break away from the doppelganger that sealed the fate of tribes in India as the proverbial 'other' in India's 'tryst' with destiny?

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# Books

**PEOPLE POWER: The Naxalite Movement in Central Bihar** by Prakash Louis. Wordsmiths, Delhi, 2002.

BIHAR is notorious both for its poverty and a political establishment that has been appallingly insensitive to questions of development. Not surprisingly the state continues to be predominantly rural in character, implying that the scope for non-agricultural employment is extremely limited. Hence the main reason for the depressed economic conditions of members of the rural underclass, comprising petty tenants and landless labourers, is their partial or total deprivation from access to land, the principal means of production. However, as pointed out by Louis (pp. 114-15), the depressed conditions of the underclass cannot be understood only in terms of land relations or the concomitant class structure.

Their travails are also an outcome of what he categorises as a 'semi-feudal social structure', denoting an oppressive system of caste domination, compelling low-ranking castes, and especially dalits, to be at the receiving end. There is therefore a massive reservoir of discontent, and hence a huge potential for political mobilisation. As none of the important national or regional political parties, or the governments formed by them, have so far transcended populism, there is enormous scope for genuinely addressing the reasons for the poverty, oppression and exploitation of the people at large. Louis' work shows how Naxalite politics in central Bihar provide possibilities of redeeming the downtrodden from the consistent betrayal by the dominant political establishment.

Data for the study have been assembled through interviews as well as through written sources, such as diaries, handbills, posters, newspaper reports and reports of civil rights groups. As many as 44 villages were covered. Those interviewed comprised both protagonists and opponents of the Naxalite movement, among whom some were hostile to the author's work. In the process he risked physical harm as well as harassment by the police. His determination to pursue the inquiry in spite of such odds is not only a major achievement but is also a reflection of his political commitment to the plight of the downtrodden. However, it is strange that this commitment is not reflected in his handling of the basic postulates of two contradictory approaches to the study of society – the functionalist and the Marxist. The two approaches are simply detailed on pp.19-23, but they are neither critiqued nor is any indication given of the author's preference for the Marxist approach that *implicitly* informs his study. I strongly believe that academics who study oppressive structures – whether based on caste, class, race, or gender – need to actively adopt the conflict approach as an analytical tool.

Louis' work *implicitly* raises certain fundamental questions regarding the Naxalite movement in central Bihar. I deliberately say 'implicitly' because the work points to these questions without actually posing them *explicitly* in the form adopted below. In my view it is important to raise these issues in order to comprehend the basic thrust of the Naxalite movement as well as its chief limitations. The questions are: (i) the major difference between the Naxalite movement and earlier agrarian movements in Bihar; (ii) the principal

contradictions in the contemporary agrarian structure of central Bihar, and the social forces against which the movement has to battle; and (iii) how the movement has addressed the crucial gender question, especially by way of regarding women and men as equal partners not only in the struggle for a better life but in interpersonal relations as well.

The Naxalite movement is fundamentally different from the agrarian movements that took place during the colonial period, notably those led by the Kisan Sabha, because it addresses the oppression suffered by the lowest strata of the agrarian population, both in terms of class and caste. The Kisan Sabha had mobilized mainly the upper stratum of the tenantry during the colonial era against *zamindari* oppression. Such tenants (designated as occupancy *raiya*s) belonged to the traditional upper castes (notably Bhumihar and Rajput) as well as to the upper layers of those designated today as Other Backward Classes (OBC), notably Yadav and Kurmi. The Sabha had not intervened significantly in addressing the oppression suffered by the insecure tenants-at-will and labourers at large by the strata above them, especially those designated here as the upper tenantry.

The uniqueness of the Naxalite movement also lies in its revolutionary solution to the oppression of these strata, because the capture of state power is essential for their emancipation. It should be noted, though, that the movement is deeply fragmented – a major problem, to which I shall return later – and comprises as many as 14 groups, among whom the following three are prominent in terms of influence and territorial spread: Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist)-Liberation (henceforth Liberation), Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist)-Party Unity, and Maoist Communist Centre. Of these three, the first operates openly, which includes participation in the electoral process, while the latter two are underground. All the three, especially those that are underground, have established front organizations to propagate the party line, such as organizations of labourers and cultivators, and women's, youth and cultural wings.

The oppressors of the underclass in contemporary Bihar are those who constituted the secure tenantry during the colonial period. Ironically, due to the distortions in the implementation of the land reform programme in Bihar, the position of such tenants became consolidated. As mentioned earlier, they comprised the traditional upper castes as well as sections of the OBC. These groups are also well represented in the various organs of the state, including the legislature, the judi-

ciary, and the executive (covering especially the police, revenue, and development bureaucracies). Indeed, due to this nexus, the wielders of caste and class dominance in the countryside are in a fundamental sense able to appropriate the organs of the state at the local level to sustain and promote their interests. Therefore, the wielders of social power in rural Bihar today embody caste power, class power and state power, and the basic contradiction is between such groups and the underclass at large. As such the Naxalite struggle is simultaneously against the local oppressors belonging to dominant castes as well as against state power.

It is a matter of regret that the schemes of agrarian classification used by the movement, as cited by Louis (see, for example, pp.172-73) do not throw much light on these contradictions, and the author fails to offer any critical insights on the issue. From the point of view of the movement, it seems that the degree of land control is the principal basis for delineating agrarian classes, and Louis too appears to share this view (see, for instance, chart 5.1). At one point, though, there is a hint that he might enlighten the reader by creatively linking caste and class (pp.25-27), but the connection is not carried through in the pages that follow. The scope of this review does not permit a detailed discussion on this problem, and only some observations are briefly offered here.

Schemes of agrarian classification based solely on the scale of landownership are analytically flawed because they fail to connect caste power with land control. Class power in rural Bihar – implying the ability to control the lives of the labouring population – is not attributable to landownership *per se*. Rather, it is membership of a socially powerful caste that also controls a substantial amount of land that accounts for class position. In spite of large differences in the distribution of land among the members of a dominant caste – some might be rich while most others might be poor – all of them partake of the culture of exploitation, implying a complex of norms imposed on the subordinate population enabling the former to control the life of the community. In this connection it is apt to recall the extremely insightful observation by Arvind Das that even the weakest Yadav in contemporary Bihar possessed the capacity to flex his muscles politically ('Bihar: Torn Red Flag', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 35, 7, 2000: 506).

On the vital gender question it is evident that the movement has still to overcome several problems. While the record of struggles, as pointed out by Louis, shows that women have actively participated in seve-

ral of them, no serious attention has been paid by the Naxalite groups to dismantling the hierarchies between men and women, especially with regard to the distribution of material resources and political power. Also unaddressed is the vital question of dismantling the practically impregnable walls within the ranks of the exploited and oppressed castes by abandoning the 'casteist' obsession with 'purity' of blood and its corollary, endogamous marriage, which reproduces the caste system. Further, it hardly needs stating that the rejection of the concern for the purity of blood would diminish the need to control female sexuality within a caste group, which in turn would enable women to have greater control over their own bodies as well as greater agency in making choices in areas affecting their personal lives. I wish the author had probed such issues, because it seems difficult to imagine 'people power' in circumstances that exclude women from being deemed as full-fledged people along with men.

Some comments are in order on a few technical aspects of the book. The index lacks rigour. The bibliography lists works rather mechanically, because it appears that not all of them have actually been used to develop the author's arguments. For instance, although my book (*Social Power and Everyday Class Relations*, Sage, 2001) has been listed, I have been unable to locate a critical reference to it in the text. On the other hand, I wonder why Bela Bhatia's doctoral dissertation (*The Naxalite Movement in Central Bihar*, University of Cambridge, 2000) finds no place in the bibliography, although, to the best of my knowledge, Louis had access to it. The research was on an identical problem in the same region of Bihar.

In the light of the radical objectives of the various Naxalite formations and their actual experiences on the ground, a question that arises is: how much ground has been covered towards the creation of a just social order? There is no doubt, as pointed out by Louis, that the movement has, despite tremendous odds, conscientized large masses of people in several areas of central Bihar, making them aware of the possibility of emancipating themselves from oppressive caste and class structures. The higher level of consciousness among such people goes beyond the exercise of organized pressure to ensure the payment of statutory wages or effect the distribution of ceiling surplus land among the landless. Thus, wherever the movement is influential, the lower castes, and especially the dalits, have achieved dignity in public spaces. (In a village with which I am familiar in Rohtas district, where Liberation has a presence, dalits today walk freely in public

spaces and also have access to the main village temple.) Further, women labourers are no longer subject to sexual exploitation by upper caste employers. Clearly such achievements transcend mere economism, but unfortunately they do not lead to a substantially better future for the masses at large because the latter continue to be at the receiving end of material and political structures that deny them the means of well being.

In spite of the long road that clearly lies ahead for radically transforming the present, iniquitous social order, Louis shows that the movement is also fraught with destructive inner contradictions, resulting in mutual killings of activists and supporters. The consequences are enormously counterproductive, because they not only blunt the edge of the movement – indeed the momentum is dissipated among its various fragments – but also confuse and perhaps alienate the oppressed who constitute the basic source of support. Thus, each principal Naxalite formation is in a sense piloting its own movement, and that too only in part against the class enemy, while the rest of the energy is spent in eliminating their counterparts in other formations.

Louis is, no doubt, distressed by this problem, for he raises the following questions at the end of his work: 'Will the Naxalite movement fulfil the hopes and yearnings of the masses? Or will it betray them like the state, with which it has locked horns for nearly four decades?' (p. 282). Such questions call for some serious introspection on the part of the Naxalite leadership. However, I wonder whether it is fair to compare the failures of the Naxalites with the betrayal of the people at large by the state. The anti-people stance of the latter is deliberate: an inevitable consequence of the nexus between the interests embodied in it and social power. On the other hand the strategies adopted by the Naxalite formations, leading to mutual killings, could be viewed as aberrations rather than acts of betrayal.

Anand Chakravarti

**REFLECTIONS ON META-REALITY: Transcendence, Emancipation and Everyday Life** by Roy Bhaskar. Sage Publications, Delhi, 2002.

THE collection of lectures compiled together in this volume comes as a bit of a surprise for those who have engaged with the author's earlier work. This is not because Bhaskar has departed from the critical realism that he has so carefully fashioned in a series of

books. On the contrary, it is the scope of the philosophy of meta-reality, as he terms the new project, that is unanticipated. This philosophy is to be elaborated in a forthcoming volume of his entitled *The Philosophy of Meta-Reality*.

The dichotomies of modernity have given sleepless nights to many a philosopher and social scientist. In *Dialectic: The Pulse of Freedom* and books that preceded it, Bhaskar developed critical realism as a philosophy that overcomes some of these dichotomies. In the volume under review a chapter addresses social science and self-realization. Bhaskar turns reflexively upon the origins of critical realism, for this is the platform from which he subsequently elaborates the philosophy of meta-reality. This discussion on the social sciences commences with a historical overview of the five phases in the discourse of modernity. Bhaskar anchors the origins of critical realism in the fourth phase, in the political upheavals of 1968 and the early 1970s that swept the western world. The other side of these upheavals was witnessed as a backlash against the forces of modernization and development that had been unleashed in the post-colonial nations and other developing societies. Clearly, the seeds of this unrest were already present in the hysteria of modernization and development pursued uncritically during the third phase of the discourse of modernity. While this book is more or less committed to discussing the implications of the generalized philosophy of self-realization, Bhaskar does provide us a glimpse of the method he employed to engage with the canonical contrasts of the social sciences: hermeneutics and positivism, naturalism and anti-naturalism, structure and agency, individual and collective. The strategy pursued was to identify the 'grounds of the dispute'. The next stage involved pinning down the errors that both antagonists committed.

As mentioned earlier, critical realism forms the basis of the philosophy of meta-reality. This philosophy aspires to transcend the dualities that have hitherto marked the western philosophical tradition, and is premised on the understanding that the non-dual underpins modes of being, including human being and sustains the world of duality. The relationship between the two (the non-dual and the dual) that the book seeks to elaborate is crucial to critical realism's concerns with emergence and stratification. One of the contexts of this effort is its emancipatory agenda – an agenda that has inspired Bhaskar's earlier work as well. The reckoning with the non-dual commences with the recognition of the multi-level or stratified nature of reality. These

subsist on a foundational level that is 'beings ground state'. The properties of this level of being are necessary for being to be, as well as those that distinguish it as a particular being. The ground state qualities of human beings, differentiated though they are, are linked to those of other human beings through what Bhaskar labels the cosmic envelope.

Bhaskar introduces a number of notions such as cosmic envelope and co-presence to reveal the unfolding of the possibilities of being. Traversing through well-mined metaphysical territory, Bhaskar informs his reader that the philosophy of meta-reality stems from a radical critique of the socio-economic and philosophical discourses of modernity. The chapter on critical realism transcending both modernism and post-modernism and the one on social science and self-realization highlight the themes central to this philosophical project. They also disclose the genealogy from which Bhaskar formulates his critique of modernity and post-modernism. Marxism continues to provide a frame for Bhaskar's philosophical departure. The philosophy itself is developed in a different idiom, but the flavour of Marx's romanticism is constantly present: '...we are the only true experts, and each one will be an expert in his own particular way, affecting this extraordinary transformation, a truly universal but silent revolution.'

The justification for a philosophy of meta-reality derives from its engagement with a re-enchanted reality, for only in that manner, Bhaskar contends, can true novelty emerge in our times. The problematic of emergence and stratification is another running theme. This novelty does not emerge from a solid 'causally efficacious paradigm', but from 'the space beyond, behind and between thoughts and things.' This kind of novelty that emerges from the interstices 'will be absolutely new, but absolutely universal...' In the search for truly innovative solutions, however diverse their mode of presentation, it is necessary to plunge deeper to the depths of being.

It is on the question of ontology that Bhaskar proceeds to offer his critique of both modernism and post-modernism. This is where critical realism diverges from both modernism and postmodernism. He proposes instead four categories that are essential to the understanding of being: these could be summed up as the levels of universality, differentiation, geo-historical situatedness, and irreducible uniqueness. These categories are introduced in order to apprehend the concrete singularity of every universal and the dialectic employed for doing so is termed dialectical

universalisability. This form of critique is constitutive of critical realism and is grounded in the proposition that a critique of the forms of thought is a critique of the forms of being. While the common ground of both modernism and post-modernism is their anti-ontological posture, the author goes on to suggest that postmodernism is a 'true cousin' of fundamentalism. Both share the essentiality of difference, and go separate ways on the question of morals – of right and wrong. This volume is a prolegomena to a work in progress and certainly marks a shift in Bhaskar's evolution. The book states the problematic posed by our dualist theories of knowledge and indicates wherein possible resolutions exist. The next volume would probably proffer a fuller explication of some of the themes and arguments that this book touches upon.

**Dhruv Raina**

**CHILDREN IN GLOBALISING INDIA: Challenging Our Conscience** edited by Enakshi Ganguly Thukral. Haq, Centre for Child Rights, Delhi, 2002.

EVER since the Centre for Science and Environment (ESE), Delhi pioneered the concept of citizen's reports, sectorally specialised NGOs in collaboration with 'socially committed researchers' have produced a wide range of assessment documents. The belief is that in addition to providing data on different social sectors, these publications play a vital role in advocacy programmes. Unfortunately, many of these reports fall short on quality parameters – insufficient appreciation of the complexity of social statistics being just one glaring lacuna – and come across as overly driven by ideological concerns, in particular those defined by donors. Alongside inadequate coverage is a problem with deployed frameworks of understanding/analysis.

Nevertheless, it undeniable that the few reports that do make the grade help move both public and policy discourse in directions that conventional researches have not managed. In addition to the CSE reports referred to earlier, the work on Prisoner's Rights by Colin Gonsalves et al, the PROBE report on elementary education, the VHAI report on the Status of India's Health – just to name a few – need to be lauded for their role in highlighting socially neglected questions and sparking off attendant action.

HAQ-Centre for Child Rights is a relative newcomer in this crowded terrain. Last year, HAQ had presented a decadal analysis of the Union Budget from

a child rights perspective (India's Children and the Union Budget) which helped deconstruct the various claims made by the government about what was being done to secure a better future for our children. Unsurprisingly, it made for a depressing read. Not only were the funds allocated for different child centred schemes low, the decade of the '90s witnessed a declining trend. Worse, the efficiency of resource utilisation was abysmal.

Few people, however, care to look at budgetary analysis. Ever fewer understand them. It is likely, however, that the current offering – both more comprehensive in its coverage as also more reader-friendly – will enjoy a better reception. Crucial because few of us are aware of the gravity of the situation. Expectations of India's position in the coming decades need to be read against the grim reality of the stress that our children, in particular those from the socially and economically deprived strata, are experiencing. And despite claims about growth rates, poverty reduction and forex reserves – the translation of 'ostensible' macro prosperity into improved status of children remains questionable.

All this becomes extremely troubling because India (unlike many other developing countries) is an enthusiastic signatory to dozens of child rights covenants. Yet, as the essay on the legal regime indicates, our national laws are often out of sync with UN conventions. Further, there is little pressure to comply with reporting requirements. A similar point is made more explicitly in the sections on 'juvenile (in)justice' and the 'trafficked child'. If anything, when we look at the situation of marginalised children – orphans, beggars, those forced to live on streets – as also those who are sent to corrective institutions, the descriptions by Charles Dickens come alive.

Votaries of the glories of our civilizational greatness are unlikely to be pleased with the essay on the trafficked child – both girls and boys – and the growth of the prostitution and pornography industries. For far too long the shapers of our discourse have seen these as western perversions given their proclivity to push matters related to sexuality under the carpet. Worse, the few efforts at crackdown on the mafias controlling these trades, often further victimise the children. One suspects, the operation of a deep-seated contempt for the lower classes works towards converting the victim into a complicitous subject.

Equally grim is the essay on 'Children in Armed Conflict'. A few years back Graca Machel had authored an outstanding report, 'The impact of war on children'.

Meenakshi Ganguly enlarges the framework to include children affected by communal riots, possibly representing a less dramatic breakdown than J&K or the North East but more widespread and endemic. Treatment of trauma is in its infancy in the country and unless decision-makers, including NGOs, turn their attention to this problem, we will continue to produce new generations of maladjusted and disgruntled youth.

The one section I am uneasy about relates to child labour/the working child; more so regarding children out of school. It is insufficiently realised, despite the work of the Concerned for Working Children (CWC), that many children combine work and schooling. Equally that children drop out of school for many reasons, the need to work being only one. Thus, rather than treat all out of school children in the appropriate age group as child labourers and push for comprehensive legislation to ban all child work, a more realistic and realisable policy option would be to make schooling more attractive as also protect child workers. Of course, banning child labour participation in hazardous industries is necessary.

Overall, this volume represents a commendable effort in putting together a comprehensive picture of children in India. True, this picture veers towards the grim. But given the combination of both state and social apathy, this is only to be expected.

**Harsh Sethi**

**GENDER, CASTE, AND RELIGIOUS IDENTITIES: Restructuring Class in Colonial Punjab** by Anshu Malhotra. Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2002.

Anshu Malhotra's *Gender, Caste, and Religious Identities* falls at the intersection of, and makes contributions to, three important bodies of scholarship: recent scholarship on caste, group identity-construction, and South Asian women's studies. This work carefully examines the changing dynamics of communal (whether religious or caste-based) identities in late 19th and early 20th century colonial Punjab. Malhotra illustrates how caste was reshaped in the colonial context to provide an important foundation for communal identity and class consciousness, and concentrates her analysis on its increasing importance to upper caste Punjabis. Malhotra's principle contribution, however, is her examination of how women's social position was redefined during the colonial period as a marker

of status for upper caste groups. This study uses a wide range of sources to substantiate arguments, including colonial archival records, Punjabi and Hindi reformist literature, and interviews with members of the last pre-partition generation whose lives were marked by the transformations under study. By delving into both colonial and indigenous sources, Malhotra illustrates how multiple influences on social and religious reform during the period interacted with and transformed one another.

The main focus of Malhotra's work is how gender relations and the status of women responded to changes in the social and political relevance of caste. Women were central to the reworking of caste because, Malhotra argues, 'women and the management of their sexuality were the hallmarks of caste status' (3). That caste should have taken on new significance in this period is not self-evident, and Malhotra shows how the 'colonial gaze' – the way that the colonial state understood Punjabi society upon its annexation of the area in 1849 – privileged caste (as well as tribe and custom) in Punjabi society. In response, indigenous Punjabis, particularly high caste Punjabis, saw caste as a means to negotiate status within the new colonial society and regime. For these groups, cultivating and projecting ideal female behaviour was intrinsic to the project.

Two organizations in the Punjab that were central to preserving caste norms, and in certain cases to creating them anew, were the Arya Samaj and the Singh Sabha. Malhotra argues that despite overtly embracing notions of equality both organizations (or significant branches within them) were intent on sustaining the social and political status of higher castes. These and other sympathetic organizations and individuals published newspapers, journals, novels, and tracts, and these materials provide Malhotra with the bulk of her source material. The first chapter of *Gender, Caste, and Religious Identities* introduces the genesis of the Arya Samaj and the Singh Sabha and the colonial context to which they were, in large part, responding. Malhotra adds to the extensive existing literature on these organizations by focusing attention on the central position of women's reform in the Arya Samaj's and the Singh Sabha's negotiation of social status. In Malhotra's words, '[M]en found it possible to stabilize status through regulating women's conduct' (46). The remaining four chapters of the work address the specific programme of indigenous reformers intent on maintaining caste and status in colonial Punjab.

The second chapter addresses the fascinating nexus between colonial concerns about female infan-

ticide (linked in the colonial imagination to the high cost of weddings) and indigenous responses to the colonial state's attempts to reform cultural norms. Malhotra argues that colonial officials associated certain cultural practices (high marriage expenses, for example) with high caste Punjabis and were keen to 'reform' such practices in the supposed interest of women's social status. The result, however, was rather the opposite. In associating wedding expenditure with high caste status, the colonial state helped solidify a ready indicator of status. As Malhotra argues, 'the colonial state's meddling tended to give a fixity to ideal high caste customs, as such behaviour became a symbol of prestige, as indeed the state recognized the high-born through their "traditions"' (61).

Chapter three concentrates on the treatment of widows arguing that Punjab's high caste reformers were inclined towards advocating an ascetic widowhood that would curb what was perceived by these males to be a threatening sexuality. While there was little space for the assertions of women's selfhood in the social and economic structure of the period, Malhotra attempts to highlight those few women who tried to do so. Concentrating on the tale of one widow, Savitri Devi, Malhotra argues that she, and others like her, were able to 'at times cut loose from the ideological shenanigans of the new patriarchy to assert their selfhood' (115).

In chapter four Malhotra focuses on the idealized wife in reformist imaginations. This chapter shows the relationship between reformist educational agendas for women and how they supported the creation of the *pativrata* wife, a conservative concept of ideal womanhood. This ideal emphasized a controlled sexuality, a submissive nature, and proper religiosity. After outlining inter-organization debates between reformers on what constituted proper female education (uniformly conducted by men), Malhotra again shifts attention to women's voices—however fragmentary—that tried to assert an autonomous and often contestatory vision.

The fifth and final chapter of the work shows how male reformers impinged upon women's popular culture. She argues that many high caste women had historically enjoyed access to spaces (the Sufi shrine or local holyman's hospice, for example) and practices that were not circumscribed by their household's men. This threatening behaviour was a target for reformers for both its inter-caste predilections and its mingling of people from different religious communities. Malhotra argues that reformers were largely success-

ful in curtailing women's access to these places and practices by bringing their notion of proper conduct to bear on women's lives.

Throughout her book Malhotra maintains focus on how Arya Samaj and Singh Sabha reforms helped maintain high caste status. In doing so, this volume contributes to a recent body of scholarship on caste, including Susan Bayly's *Caste, Society and Politics in India* (1999) and Nicholas B. Dirks's *Castes of Mind* (2001). Both of these works rethink the significance of caste and explore how caste was transformed in the colonial period. Malhotra's study adds historical specificity to arguments about caste's emergence during the colonial period as an important marker in a world of changing social relations. In looking specifically at the reformist agendas of the Arya Samaj and the Singh Sabha and how their programmes contributed to the construction of religious identities, Malhotra's work also contributes to our understanding of the forces that contributed to the processes of self-definition that were underway in colonial Punjabi society. Hers is a welcome contribution alongside works such as Harjot Oberoi's *The Construction of Religious Boundaries* (1994) on the Sikh community or Nonica Datta's *Forming an Identity* (1999) on the Jat community, both of which also concentrate on the salience of identity formation in the context of the social and religious ferment of the period.

Most squarely, however, this work makes a marked contribution to South Asian women's studies. In concentrating specifically on the reform of women's behaviour, whether inspired by the colonial state or by indigenous reformers, this work provides insights into the forces that framed women's lives. Malhotra explores multiple discourses on women (which often framed women as objects, not subjects) that were entwined in attempts to reinscribe a patriarchal high caste order in Punjabi society. That women's voices are muted (although Malhotra makes a keen effort to resurrect them where possible) is a reflection on the limitations of the sources at a historian's disposal for this period. Relying mostly on Arya Samaj or Singh Sabha reformist literature, invariably written by men, this book is able to give only limited scope to women's perspectives. However, the Arya Samaj and the Singh Sabha were extremely influential on discourse in the region, and the careful analysis of their literature tells us much about the status of women in this period, the forces and discourses with which they had to contend, and which shaped many of their lives.



For its contributions, this work would have benefited from a more rigorous engagement with the question of class and modernity. In the introduction Malhotra posits that there was an ambivalent relationship between caste and class. She writes, [t]he idea of caste, both as a marker of status, and as an organizing principle of daily life persisted. Nevertheless, it is clear that a certain amount of embarrassment with its praxis crept into the thinking of the middle classes now. This embarrassment is to be understood in the context of acquiring appropriate modernity, a project central to the contest among elites. (2)

The desire to be modern is again asserted when Malhotra writes that 'the attitudes that a people harboured towards their women was also an index separating a successful from a failed modernity' (3). The body of the work, however, does not address either the correlation and/or ambivalence between caste and class in significant detail, nor does Malhotra indicate what she means in her use of the concept of modernity, failed or otherwise. Given the contested nature of modernity's meanings, particularly in different historical and geographical contexts (not to mention the critical interventions of scholars on this question) this reader

would have benefited from clarification on what Malhotra intended with her use of the term.

Additionally, while Malhotra covers much ground in this volume, the discussion would have been more complete if it had incorporated more material, even secondary, on Punjab's Muslim communities. While the emphasis on high caste status may appear to circumscribe discussion to Hindus and Sikhs, the topics Malhotra focuses on – colonial interventions in custom, questions of female infanticide, women's education, and the attempted reform of women's popular culture, to name just a few – were all areas of Muslim discourse as well. Drawing Muslim narratives into this work would have provided interesting insights into the nature of class consolidation during the colonial era. This would have been welcome given the scholarly emphasis on the consolidation of what are often deemed to be antagonistic religious communities during this period.

All in all, however, this book is a welcome contribution and valuable addition to South Asian scholarship. Many will undoubtedly benefit from its insights and arguments, as well as its careful bibliography.

Farina Mir



### Oxfam GB Fellowship Programme

Oxfam GB, headquartered in Oxford, is an international humanitarian, development and campaign organisation working with others in more than 70 countries to find lasting solutions to poverty and suffering. Oxfam (India) Trust, an India arm of Oxfam GB, has been working in India for over 50 years. In 2002, we, along with other members of Oxfam International, launched the global 'Make Trade Fair' Campaign ([www.maketradefair.com](http://www.maketradefair.com)) because Oxfam believes that world trade can be a powerful engine to reduce poverty if the rules that govern trade are not rigged in favour of rich nations.

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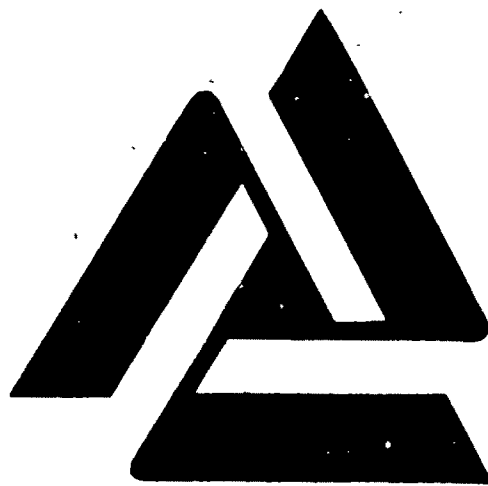
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# Comment

## National campaign for electoral reforms

THE Supreme Court's verdict of March 13 on the constitutionality of Section 33 B of the RP Act inserted through Act 72 of 2002 is a milestone in the evolution of our republic. The Parliament's ill-advised effort to curtail the fundamental right of citizens to know the criminal and financial antecedents of candidates has been held unconstitutional.

The issue has come to surface with the efforts of citizens' groups to unearth criminal record of candidates. The pioneering efforts of Lok Satta in 1999 through its Election Watch movement and screening of candidates generated tremendous public response and pressurized major parties to desist from nominating candidates with criminal record. Thanks to this public pressure, in Andhra Pradesh, in subsequent elections, parties refrained from nominating new candidates with known criminal record. The process of criminalization of politics has been arrested through citizen initiatives, though established politicians with criminal antecedents continue to be nominated.

Based on this success of Lok Satta in AP, Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR) filed a writ petition in Delhi High Court, whose judgment in favour of disclosures was challenged by the Union government before the Supreme Court. PUCL later joined as a petitioner in this case. The Apex court in a reasoned judgment on 2 May 2002 held that the voters have a fundamental right to know the criminal and financial antecedents of candidates. On government's refusal to incorporate such disclosures as a part of the nomination process, the Election Commission on June 28 issued a detailed notification in compliance

with the court verdict. This notification covered the criminal record – including convictions, charges pending and cases taken cognizance, and financial record – including assets, liabilities and dues to public financial institutions – of the candidate, spouse and members of the family. The Union government then drafted an Ordinance and on 16 August recommended to the President its approval. On the same day, leading citizens and activists on behalf of National Campaign for Electoral Reforms urged the President to refer the Ordinance to the Supreme Court under Article 143 of the Constitution, as its provisions violated fundamental rights under Article 19(1) and were expressly violative of the Supreme Court verdict. The President returned the Ordinance to the government for reconsideration on 23 August, but the Cabinet reiterated its recommendation to the President without any changes on 24 August 2002. The President had no option but to promulgate the Ordinance on 24 August.

Lok Satta, PUCL and ADR challenged the constitutionality of the Ordinance, which later was enacted by Parliament as Act 77 of 2002. P.P. Rao and Prashant Bhushan appeared for Lok Satta before Supreme Court. Justice Rajinder Sachar, Sanjay Parikh and Kamini Jaiswal appeared on behalf of the other petitioners. The Supreme Court verdict on 13 March is a result of this petition.

The verdict has the following consequences:

1. Section 33 B of RP Act which militates against disclosures other than those specified in law is held unconstitutional and is void in law.

2. The Election Commission's notification of June 28 stands valid and will have prospective application.
3. Candidates must now disclose the financial antecedents as specified by Supreme Court earlier.
4. Criminal disclosures covered by the law fall short of Supreme Court judgment and to that extent Election Commission's notification stands.

This is an important milestone in our democratic evolution. Once again, the resilience of our democratic system, the inherent strength of institutions, and the constitutional checks and balances stand as testimony to the maturity and vibrancy of our governance system.

We congratulate the advocates who marshalled the arguments ably on behalf of citizens and helped the court form its conclusions. Millions of Indians, several organizations and media all have fought this battle for democracy and liberty in keeping with glorious traditions of citizen assertion and people's sovereignty. We salute those sentinels of freedom.

Finally, this should not be seen as a struggle between the people and the political parties. The parties have a vital and often thankless task to perform in a democracy. Very often they are captive in the hands of political fiefdoms which dominate the electoral scene in a first-past-the-post system. Our parties are striving hard to sustain our democracy against great odds. They need our full support in this endeavour. Equally, the parties must take this as an opportunity, not a threat. This is a priceless opportunity for our political system to break itself loose from criminal elements, unaccounted and excessive money power, and increasing perception of illegitimacy of the power game.

We are confident that our parties and legislators will exhibit the requisite courage, wisdom and foresight to accept this verdict of the Supreme Court and use it as a launching pad for engineering far-reaching and vital electoral and governance reforms. The people of India look up to our political leadership for wise counsel and resolute action to strengthen democracy.

This is not a battle field for legislative supremacy. Every right-thinking democrat supports the supremacy of the Parliament, comprising our own elected representatives, in making laws. The concerns about judicial usurpation of executive and legislative authority are clearly misplaced in this case involving fundamental rights and sanctity of democratic process.

Undoubtedly India is crying for reforms in our electoral system, process of power and judiciary. This verdict and people's right to know must be the starting point of such a democratic reform.

We, on behalf of National Campaign for Electoral Reforms, appeal to the political parties, media, and enlightened citizens to fully respect this verdict of the Supreme Court, and work for genuine democratic reforms to help us fulfil our potential as a nation and minimise avoidable suffering. The people of India expect of us no less, and they ask of us no more.

**Jayaprakash Narayan**

## **The police menace in a 'democracy'**

IN mid-December 2002 retired Admiral Tahiliani released a shocking report in Delhi. Tahiliani chairs the Indian chapter of Transparency International, the international institution that has regularly over the last decade ranked about a hundred countries according to their reputation for corruption. India has always claimed a high place in those rankings. Last year TI-India commissioned a study of India's administration. The report estimated that in 10 sectors of activity nearly Rs 27,000 crore changed hands in bribes to public servants during the preceding 12 months, a figure larger than the budgets of most of the states in India. And this covered only low level bribery, not the large packages that attract the prominent servants of the people, the likes of Sukh Ram.

The people who responded to the enquiry branded the police as the most corrupt part of the administration.

Are you surprised? Have you ever had to complain of an offence—cheating, an assault, a robbery perhaps—at a police station? The law requires the Station Officer to record your complaint in one of two registers which it prescribes (separately for serious and minor cases). But you are lucky if after making you wait interminably the officer deigns to take it down on a scrap of paper which he may or may not, as fancy takes him, promote into a First Information Report. Only serious complaints (cognizable ones) lead to investigation; so our cops do all they can to turn those scraps of paper into non-cognizable cases. Unless, of course, you happen to be a VIP. On the other hand, if you are accusing a VIP—so many VIPs today are themselves criminals—then you have little chance of reaching the FIR stage, much less an investigation of your charge.

In addition to this reluctance to register, by resorting to another trick in the book—systematically downgrading the gravity of offences he does register—the

Inspector in charge of a police station can claim that his efficiency has reduced the crime level in his beat. Just before he retired, Mumbai's last Police Commissioner did just that. The crime rate, he said, had fallen – was it 13%? Should we expect that similar manipulation will let the new Commissioner better his predecessor's figure and claim an even tighter grip on crime in the city?

This kind of device was most recently (if unsuccessfully) used in the Salman Khan case. According to press reports Salman had killed a person sleeping on the footpath of Hill Road, Bandra, Mumbai. He had severely injured two others, driving his car (without a licence) over the three of them after heavy drinking. He then drove off, not bothering to take his victims to a hospital. The Bandra police did their best to soften the consequences for him. They obligingly converted the case, clearly one of culpable homicide under Section 304 of the Penal Code, punishable with jail for 10 years, to one under Section 304A, to which only a two-year sentence can apply. They also took their time testing the accused for liquor consumption. It was only a public outcry that forced the police to reverse the chosen course. The delinquent policeman has not suffered for his illegal leniency. He may even have profited from it.

But even if an FIR is properly recorded it is very simple for the police to spoil the investigation by deliberately careless or perverse noting of witnesses' evidence. This is one reason why so few – 6%, if I remember correctly cited in a recent report – of the charge sheets they send up to the courts end in conviction.

Another favourite tactic is unconscionable delay. That gives time for the witnesses to be bought out, so they 'forget' what happened when they appear in court. No wonder Sajjan Kumar, charged with guiding innumerable murders of Sikhs in Delhi after the Indira Gandhi assassination in 1984, got away after a trial 18 years later.

Nor are such delays peculiar to the nation's capital. Late in January the Bombay High Court imprisoned and fined a senior Police Inspector for contempt of court in two cases of attempted murder filed in 1995. Investigation had been dragged on interminably until a magistrate directed the police to complete it by May 2000. Even that order was not complied with for 12 months.

Don't let that lull you into a belief that our police are always dilatory, habitually sluggish in their work. When it suits them – and this happens oftener than most of us realise – they spring into action and finish their

enquiries with great speed. We have in India a large number of poor tribes which the British classed as habitually criminal. In those days, whenever the police were baffled in their investigations, it was easy to pounce on those tribals and, rightly or wrongly, fasten charges on them, so the police detection record could be recognized as efficient. After independence, our government dropped the criminal classification. But the police have continued to regard those tribes as criminal and to swoop down on any members of such tribes who happen to be nearby whenever their slipshod detection runs into difficulties. They are then 'induced' into confessions. The Pardhi tribe has been particularly susceptible to police attention of this kind.

Occasionally our cops can be quite candid about their methods of treatment of those on whom they want to fasten guilt. On 19 January four persons were murdered in Ghatkopar, Mumbai. Nine days later our efficient police arrested three Pardhis. *The Indian Express* quoted 'veteran police officers who have dealt with Pardhis before [as saying] that most of them are physically and mentally strong enough to bear even the third degree.' We so readily accept such branding of whole groups of people and the extraction of confessions from them by torture that this report evoked no expression of horror from most of those who read it. We delude ourselves into a belief that the police are protecting us from habitual criminals, and let this brutality in police practice continue. As the quotation above shows, torture is an accepted police procedure. In fact, you can get nearly anyone to confess to nearly any crime if your torture is cruel enough.

Meanwhile, for all that prejudice, for all that indefensible branding and brutality, serious crime in Mumbai persists day after day, because the true criminals manage by cunning or bribery to escape police attention. Our cops, then, can act with unholy speed when they want to, speed that sets aside all concern for truth or legality. The most blatant exhibition of this ruthlessness is the series of police encounters that our newspapers report every week.

I recall a public meeting in Mumbai some three years ago which discussed police performance. Lawyer-activist P.A. Sebastian attacked the force on its encounter record. In the preceding 12 months, he said, there had been 99 encounters, with 130 criminal lives lost. In all of them the police claimed to have killed in self-defence. Yet in none of these encounters had a single policeman been injured. The Police Commissioner was present on the dais with Sebastian, but I don't know

whether he was listening. His remarks a little later made no reference to Sebastian's charge.

Here again, as we read of fake encounters, these repeated expressions of state terrorism, we comfort ourselves with a foolish belief that they keep the city safe for us. On the contrary, they encourage our law enforcers to regard themselves as above the law. The police force even boasts of its 'encounter specialists'. And of course you have to honour the bravery of these super cops. Most of their victims are shot in the back, but police surgeons who conduct the post mortems are ready to doctor their findings to support encounter myths. Remember this: with police murder being so easily covered up as an encounter death, what is to stop any irascible policeman from resorting to it if he doesn't like your looks, if he is challenged over something illegal he tries to do, or if his extortion of *hafta* is resisted?

Worse than all these police practices is the way they handle large scale disturbances, particularly communal riots, which evoke their meanest instincts. Time and again they fail to act to prevent persecution of the minorities, waiting for instructions from their political masters. And time and again they help the rioters to kill, rape and loot, often helping themselves too with a bit of plunder. This happened in 1984, when Sikhs were murdered in their thousands in Delhi. It happened in 1992-93 in Mumbai, when Muslims were similarly massacred and an inept Police Commissioner had to be ultimately removed. One of his immediate deputies now faces a murder charge for killing Muslims. Both officers were promoted. Police ineptitude and brutality occurred on a still larger scale a year ago in Gujarat, where the police even let bloodthirsty BJP ministers run their control room.

The Criminal Procedure Code, the law of the land, places responsibility for law and order squarely in the hands of the police and the magistracy. It gives the political rulers no role in the control of disturbances. There is only a provision in the Police Act that allows the state government superintendence of the police. That word superintendence cannot erode the direct onus on the police explicitly set out in the Criminal Procedure Code. Yet again and again senior policemen abdicate their responsibility and dance to ministers' tune, with regard neither for their legal duty nor morality. The government taxes us so it can protect us. Instead, we are plundered and butchered with impunity.

What then can raise the poor quality of our policing? What will convince our cops that they are not above the law, that they are paid to serve the people and enforce the law, not pervert it? First, better train-

ing, of course. Judging from the way they conduct themselves, one cannot escape concluding that they learn the law only superficially, and, more importantly, that their induction programmes have no ethical content whatsoever. Training, both initial and refresher, needs improvement at all police levels, but particularly for senior officers.

Unlike our governments in India, the authorities in Thailand are seriously concerned about the depraved condition of their police. They have ordered 20,000 of their senior police officers to live for certain periods as monks in Buddhist temples so that enlightenment might dilute their addiction to corruption. There they will have to rise early each morning for meditation and prayer, and lead a luxury-free life of celibacy. There is not the slightest chance of anything similar being adopted in our country. In any case, what good would it do? Our policemen's souls – if any – are insulated against enlightenment and morality.

Next, superintendence of the police, formally a responsibility of state governments, today appears limited to informal directions from ministers on which cases to pursue and which to shelve indefinitely. 'Superintendence' can stretch even further. There have been press reports of postings and transfers being ordered against payment into ministers' offices. On 8 February, *The Indian Express* carried a front page story in its Mumbai Newline on this practice at the highest levels of the state police. At a wet dinner party a year ago an Additional Commissioner in Mumbai admitted that a few weeks earlier he had paid Rs 2,00,000 to get that post. He may have been a bit high; he went on to boast that he had already killed a man in an encounter.

Without legislation there is little possibility of real change here, and legislation to reduce unholy control and misdirection by political rulers is hardly likely. A possible move toward better supervision and control would be the creation of a Civil Services Board consisting of the seniormost civil officials and a retired judge or two to regulate promotions and transfers of senior officials. The National Police Commission (NPC) proposed this many years back, and four years ago the Supreme Court thought that there was 'urgent need for the state governments... to set up a credible mechanism for selection of police chiefs in the states. The Central government must pursue the matter with the state governments and ensure that a similar mechanism... is set up in each state for selection/appointment, tenure, transfer and posting of not merely the chief of the state police but also of all police officers of the rank of a Superintendent of Police and above.' The court had

in mind the directions it had given with respect to the CBI and the Central Vigilance Commission and the NPC's recommendation. It is probable that, on a suitable approach in public interest litigation, the court could be persuaded to make its directions more explicit and peremptory.

Third, the police resort to torture as a regular tool of the detection process can be discouraged by requiring that interrogation of witnesses and accused should invariably be videotaped. Fake confessions will not then be an easily sought solution, and fewer innocent people will be wrongly convicted. Videotaping has become a regular practice prescribed by law in two of the US states – Minnesota and Alaska – and is being voluntarily adopted in police departments elsewhere because of the frequency of wrongful convictions based on forced confessions. It would also help confirm police versions in trials. In the recent Bharat Shah prosecution in Mumbai, 13 witnesses in a row denied what they had earlier told the police. Videotaping is a simple inexpensive device crying out for adoption after the spate of witness denials that have lost so many trials for the prosecution. And yet the chance of its adoption is very slender. Sloppy investigators will fiercely resist any curb on their freedom to torture.

If one could wish for the moon one would add to these prescriptions a hope that intake into the police at high level should be restricted to persons who are truly educated. Today it is generally those who fail to make it into the IAS or the IFS who enter the IPS. Entrants like Satish Sahney, a former Police Commissioner in Mumbai, and Vibhuti Rai, an Inspector General in UP are the very rare exceptions. One recalls what a distinguished Police Commissioner of New York and later of Philadelphia, Anthony V. Bouza, once wrote: 'What police executive would believe that Ibsen, Shakespeare, Mozart, Wright, Goya and Melville hold the key to success in public office? Yet they provide the insights and understanding that lend wisdom to one's inner view and grant the philosophical grasp to guide executives among the difficult public issues that dot their life. Dealing with myths, powerful groups, and mercurial constituencies requires a firm view of the objectives and of the means to achieve them.'

In India that kind of person is most unlikely to choose a service as discredited as the IPS to join, unless his motives are venal *ab initio*. So you get a police force that is widely despised, one that tops the list in corruption surveys like Transparency International's.

J.B.D'Souza

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# Communication

ABOUT Hiv/Aids it is often said that it is less important to inquire where it is coming from than focus on where it is going. The implication being that the exponential rate at which the infection is spreading is a cause for alarm and taking preventive action to check that spread is crucial and of immediate concern. The official estimated number of persons carrying the Hiv virus in India is around four million and South Asia will soon cross sub-Saharan Africa as the part of the world with the largest number of persons living with Hiv/Aids (PLAs).

*Seminar 520*, focusing on Hiv/Aids, makes a comprehensive presentation of the issues involved and the poser by Meenakshi Datta Ghosh traces well the history of Hiv/Aids in India and describes the present status of the spread of the disease and measures being adopted by the government. One of the major initiatives is the vaccine development programme and she quotes both from the prime minister's inaugural speech at the International Policymakers Conference in New Delhi in May 2002 ('...a vaccine is the only solution') and the leader of the Opposition's equally determined expression 'as we did with small-pox and are poised to do with polio, so we will succeed in eliminating Hiv/Aids' as indicative of our political commitment to fight the virus.

The Indian government appears to have made a breakthrough in establishing a collaboration arrangement between NACO, ICMR and IAVI to develop a vaccine against the particular strand of Hiv virus prevalent in this region. However, the development will take at least ten years before it reaches the marketplace and becomes available for common use. Even then, there is some uncertainty about being able to effectively access adult populations with a preventive vaccination programme. In the interim, the best available medical option appears to be treating pregnant women who are Hiv-positive with anti-retroviral drug therapy (AZT) so that newborn babies may be spared the infection. Herbal treatment (Siddha and Ayurveda) is another less expensive option for Hiv-infected persons to postpone and delay

the onset of Aids and opportune infections like TB etc. Given the scale and magnitude of the problem, these measures appear to be a mere drop in the ocean.

Hiv/Aids afflicts mainly those from the lower socio-economic strata—commercial sex workers, migrant labour and truckers. From the migrant male workers and truckers who get infected through contact with commercial sex workers, the virus passes on to the wives and make the future progenies vulnerable to infection. The other group of injected drug-users that share needles also belong to the poorer section of society. Professional blood donors are a third group through whom Hiv spreads, though the blood safety protocol set up in the last decade may have considerably reduced this mode of transmission. The main transmission mode is through the heterosexual activity of the high-risk group in contact with commercial sex-workers and/or having sex with multiple partners.

While the surveillance data on Hiv/Aids cases in India puts the figure at four million, the worrying bit is that the transmission has moved on from the high-risk groups to the general population through the families and is affecting unborn children. The challenge lies in arresting the spread and bringing about a behaviour change towards safe and protected sexual practice among those high-risk groups where multiple sexual partners is prevalent. Even if this population is statistically small (12% of all males in the 15-49 age group) it is still significant, especially among particular socio-economic categories. With the availability of AZT the impression is that persons afflicted with Hiv may continue to lead a healthy life. Unfortunately, despite the low price of the drugs in India (owing to our patent laws, which may change after the next round of WTO negotiations) They are still unaffordable by the poor, nor is state subsidy for such large numbers possible. However, those who are economically better off can afford the therapy, as is the case in USA where the spread has been brought under control with AZT *alongside* effective public awareness campaigns and promotion of safe and protected sexual practice.



Even in other countries, viz. Brazil where the state is offering free AZT supply to registered Hiv/Aids patients, stigmatization of afflicted persons tends to drive the disease underground as persons do not want to disclose their Hiv status. In our country too, the association of Hiv with commercial sex workers stigmatizes those afflicted with the disease making the vulnerable groups aggrieved and desperate. This is a human rights issue with the persons afflicted with Hiv/Aids requiring treatment and care while society, taking a high moral ground, condemns and shuns them or at best has a charitable attitude towards the victims, often innocent families who get infected unknowingly. Societies have to learn to respect and provide adequate care and support for those afflicted with Hiv/Aids. Rather than wishing the problem away as someone else's on the basis of a misplaced moral high-ground, we need to do much more to contain the rapid spread of the disease.

In *Seminar* 520, a strong case is made by Kapil Sibal for a comprehensive legislation to enforce the human rights aspects of the Hiv/Aids issue in order to ensure proper care and treatment of PLAs, no discrimination in the workplace, and respect for confidentiality and privacy of the individual for Hiv testing. He argues that though India as a signatory to various international covenants is committed to equal treatment of Hiv/Aids patients, in the absence of a specific legislation courts depend on the wisdom of the judges who are influenced by societal norms and attitudes. A proper legislation safeguarding the interests of PLAs and other high-risk groups will help the dispensation of justice in this regard.

Similarly, Madhu Bala Nath is enthused about the imminent availability of the female contraceptive which will obviate the necessity of persuading reluctant (or macho) men to use condoms. She argues that this will finally empower the vulnerable women to protect themselves from possible Hiv infection (or even STD) and avoid frequent childbirth as well. While both measures are worthwhile, no doubt, they will work only when society, especially its male members and other champions of public morality, are persuaded to accept the changing social reality where sexual behaviour (like domestic violence) is no more a personal and private affair of individuals but affects society to the extent that innocent women and unborn children are being made to pay a heavy price.

In such a context, communication strategies to bring about behaviour change among high-risk

groups and in society at large become important. To face the reality of the migrant labour force or truckers cut off from their families, the justifiable demand for the services of commercial sex workers has to be accepted and safe and protected sex promoted more vigorously rather than only make a moral appeal for abstinence or fidelity. For ordinary mortals, particularly those engaged in stressful physical occupations, appetites need immediate fulfillment.

Arvind Singhal and Everett M Rogers in their well-documented book titled *Combating AIDS: Communication Strategies in Action* (Sage Publications, Delhi, 2003) stress that Hiv/Aids is more a behavioural issue than a bio-medical problem. While not discounting the scientific research in finding an effective vaccine against the Hiv virus and the significance of the breakthrough with the anti-retroviral drug therapy that checks the onset of Aids, Singhal and Rogers argue that there is no time for complacency. Hiv/Aids has been with us now for over two decades and while there has been some success with AZT, the price is prohibitive for the large numbers afflicted with the virus, mainly from the poorer socio-economic strata.

Singhal and Rogers trace the history of the Hiv/Aids pandemic since its first reporting in the United States in the early '80s. While it was initially restricted to the gay community, the closed nature of that group fighting for recognition and acceptance resulted in the development of effective communication strategies like peer-education, counselling and other public awareness building campaigns at a stage when there was still no treatment. *Combating Aids* also documents the effective communication strategies adopted in Thailand for widespread condom promotion and government commitment for care of afflicted persons. The authors present extensive research from five countries – Brazil, India, Thailand, South Africa and Kenya – and make a convincing case for urgent and increased advocacy and communication action to bring about behaviour change. Apart from the case-studies from the five countries and critiques of policy and programmes, Singhal and Rogers also provide a guide to effective planning of communication strategies and programmes including the importance of training in counselling among persons living with Aids (PLAs) and developing innovative monitoring and evaluation tools.

Their central thesis, backed by evidence and the resolution of the first UN General Assembly Session on Hiv/Aids (UNGASS) in 2002 and the

International Policymakers Conference in New Delhi in 2002, asserts that though medical research on Hiv/Aids has been phenomenal in the last two decades and the AZT is a landmark breakthrough, for the millions of poor people who are afflicted with the disease or belong to those vulnerable sections (particularly poor women) the answer lies in awareness through communication and affecting behaviour change. Hiv/Aids cannot be regarded merely as a bio-medical problem.

A bio-medical solution through a vaccine, as being initiated in India, is far into the future and the need of the hour is for a humane attitude towards the PLAs and vulnerable groups. In our country, beset with a wide number of illnesses from diarrhoea and cholera (gastro-enteritis) to tuberculosis to Hiv/Aids, we tend to remain unmoved by numbers of persons afflicted. The non-availability of any immediate bio-medical solution/treatment that is affordable on a scale necessary is what makes the case for a human rights approach to Hiv/Aids. There is no escape from the problem of Hiv/Aids, which is with us to stay, even if it is apparently contained among the socio-economically disadvantaged sections of society. Already it is spreading from the more urbanized and industrialized states of Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, Kerala and West Bengal to the Hindi heartland. The network of good voluntary agencies (NGOs) is not available in these Hindi-speaking states and the communication strategy will have to be different in view of the low literacy levels and other indicators of socio-economic development.

Singhal and Rogers document many effective communication strategies adopted worldwide, including the excellent work in several states in India. They are enthusiastic about the Entertainment-Education (E-E) format of multimedia programmes that are based on social learning theories and audience research. Some notable examples that Singhal and Rogers highlight in the context of Aids communication are the *Soul City* television programme (with off-shoots in other media and events) in South Africa that has consistently remained one of the three top TV drama series in South Africa. It increased person to person communication on Hiv/Aids, STD and other related health issues manifold. Radio Tanzania's *Twende na Wakati*, a highly successful story of Mkwaju (negative role model) and his wife Tunu (a positive role model who overcomes her circumstances), has been equally effective. In India there has been some effort with E-E in the context of family planning – Hum Log was the first. The present

BBC World Trust TV series, Jasoos Vijay, combined with other public service spots and radio talk shows is expected to have a significant impact on targeted audience groups.

Other innovative communication projects across the world draw upon the compassion and commitment of religious leaders in the face of social stigma and opposition. Some of the successful Indian efforts like the Healthy Highways Project using appropriate materials and contact with truck drivers or the Tamil Nadu programme of street plays, Nalamdana, that uses every performance as an educational tool with the community, have been very effective. The role of peer-educators in the Hiv awareness programme among commercial sex workers has increased condom use among clients dramatically in Kolkata (from 3% in 1992 to 92% in 1998) leading among other things to the formation of the DMSC (Durbar Mahila Samanvay Samiti) which is fighting for recognition as a trade union in West Bengal.

In the film, *Tale of the Nightfairies* by Shohini Ghosh the work of the DMSC in Sonagachi in Kolkata is documented through the narratives of some of the sexworkers and DMSC activists. One of the protagonists demands the recognition of their union of commercial sex workers with 60000 members, arguing that they are servicing a social need and what they need is freedom from harassment and police brutality and social security for themselves and their families. The DMSC opposes trafficking in minor girls – child prostitution (below 18 years) is down in Sonagachi from 20% in 1995 to 3% in 1998 – and takes care of the health and economic security of its members in times of need, apart from fighting exploitation and brutality by the local hoods and police.

The success of DMSC in Kolkata may not be adopted easily elsewhere but the film captures the confidence of the members of the union and helps break the artificial 'moral' barrier of decency as defined by society. It is significant that the use of condoms among clients of commercial sex workers is highest in Kolkata (90% in 1998) and the Hiv affliction among them has been contained significantly, while in other cities it continues to rise fast. In Kolkata, only 5% of commercial sexworkers were Hiv positive in 1998 as against 70% in Mumbai in the same year. The case for the DMSC and its positive empowering effect on commercial sexworkers needs no further evidence.

Avik Ghosh, Delhi

# Backpage

MARCH 20 will, in all likelihood, mark a turning point in global history. What turn the war in Iraq will take is uncertain; few believe that the prognosis is positive.

The bombing of Kosovo was justified on ethical grounds, and no one expressed it better than Vaclav Havel. 'If one can say of any war that it is ethical, or that it is being waged for ethical reasons, then it is true of this war. This is probably the first war that has not been waged in the name of "national interests", but rather in the name of principles and values.' He went on to argue that Kosovo had no oil fields to be coveted, that Milosevic did not threaten the territorial integrity of any member of the alliance, nor did anyone have any territorial demands on Kosovo. 'It is fighting out of a concern for the fate of others.'

The bombing of Afghanistan was defended employing the same ethical logic – the exercise of a responsibility that 'no decent person could fail to support.' Even more, we were asked to believe that the Afghan war was 'not about the narrow pursuit of national interests' but 'demonstrating responsible global citizenship' and, above all, 'helping to protect the people of Afghanistan themselves.'

The effort by the US-British administration to take the same route a third time has proven less convincing. More than principles and values, what we are now witnessing in Iraq is hubris, false pride, a bluster. 'We must demonstrate the courage to act on what we believe is right. Otherwise, no one in future will ever believe us.'

Of course, the war on Iraq is not about oil, much less the troubling fact that Saddam has shifted from the dollar to the euro as the currency for trade in oil. It is, so we are being asked to believe, about getting rid of a brutal dictator, one in possession of weapons of mass destruction that he has used on his own people and is capable of using on others. It is about bringing democracy to the Iraqi people, creating conditions so that they can, finally, truly be free.

Rarely has a side initiating war, one with potentially calamitous regional and international ramifications, come across as more suspect, Tony Blair's 'brilliant' speech in the UK House of Commons notwithstanding. Shorn of its bluster and moral exhortations, all it finally boiled down to was appeal to a false sense of honour (we have to be true to our words), to

patriotism (we must not demoralise our troops in the Gulf), and an assertion of the superiority of western values and way of life.

It has never been anyone's case – not those unwilling to back the Anglo-American resolution in the Security Council, even less the millions across the world who marched for peace – that Saddam is a 'decent' ruler or that the Iraqi citizens may not be better off without him and his regime. Part of the global anxiety is about consequences – the unavoidable loss of civilian lives, destabilisation of the Middle East, a likely filip to Islamicist reaction and terrorism, and impact on the global economy. Equally, there is apprehension about the new justificatory principles for interventionism – pre-emptive war. What George W. Bush and Tony Blair may have achieved, with their moral righteousness, is a virtual dismantling of the international order as we have known and experienced in the last five decades.

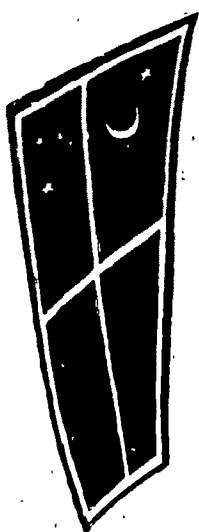
In some small measure, the roots of the current conundrum can be traced to the politicisation of humanitarianism. In a troubling book, *From Kosovo to Kabul: Human Rights and International Intervention*, analyst David Chandler discusses how over the last decade, international institutions have extended the remit of international engagement and informal groups of major powers have committed military forces and international administrators to trouble spots, often for 'peace keeping, democratisation and rights protection'. Invariably the claim is how the world's excluded and oppressed will be empowered and protected through the enforcement of their individual human rights by international institutions.

This is an proposition fraught with danger, not just because it challenges extant notions of sovereign equality but because it treats all non-western states as 'failed', incapable of ensuring the human rights of their citizens. And since human rights and democracy are the favoured core non-negotiable values, we now have a rationale for humanist militarism. We need to remind ourselves that years after Milosevic was deposed, Kosovo is still not seen as ready for self-rule. Evidently, this decision too is best taken by outsiders.

Will post-Saddam Iraq be any different?

Harsh Sethi

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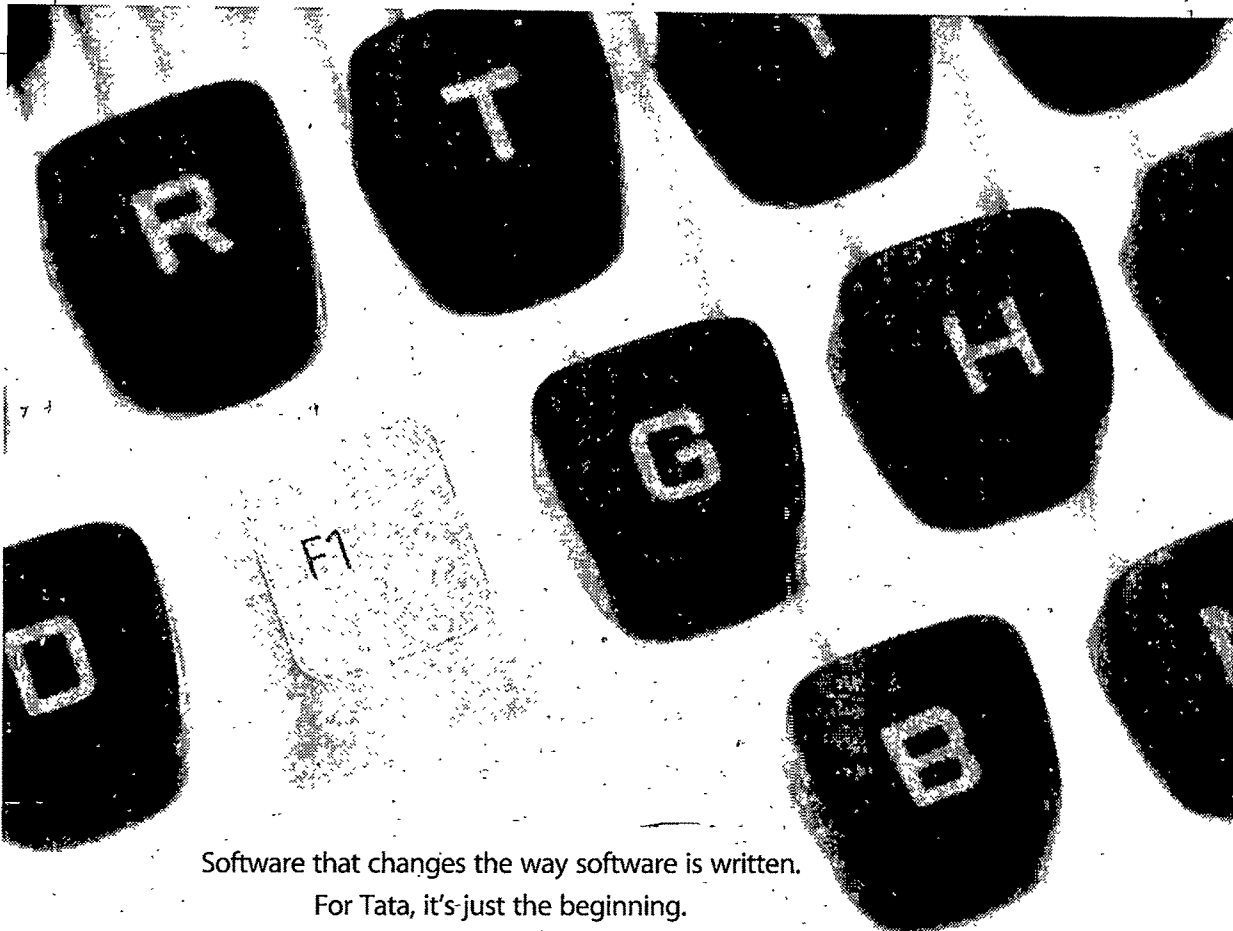
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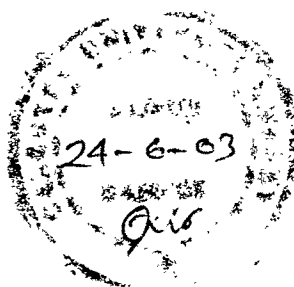
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Printed and Published by Malvika Singh on behalf of the Romeshraj Trust from Malhotra Building, Janpath,  
New Delhi and Printed by her at Kapidhvaj Printers, 639, Bawli Street, Pahar Ganj, New Delhi-110055



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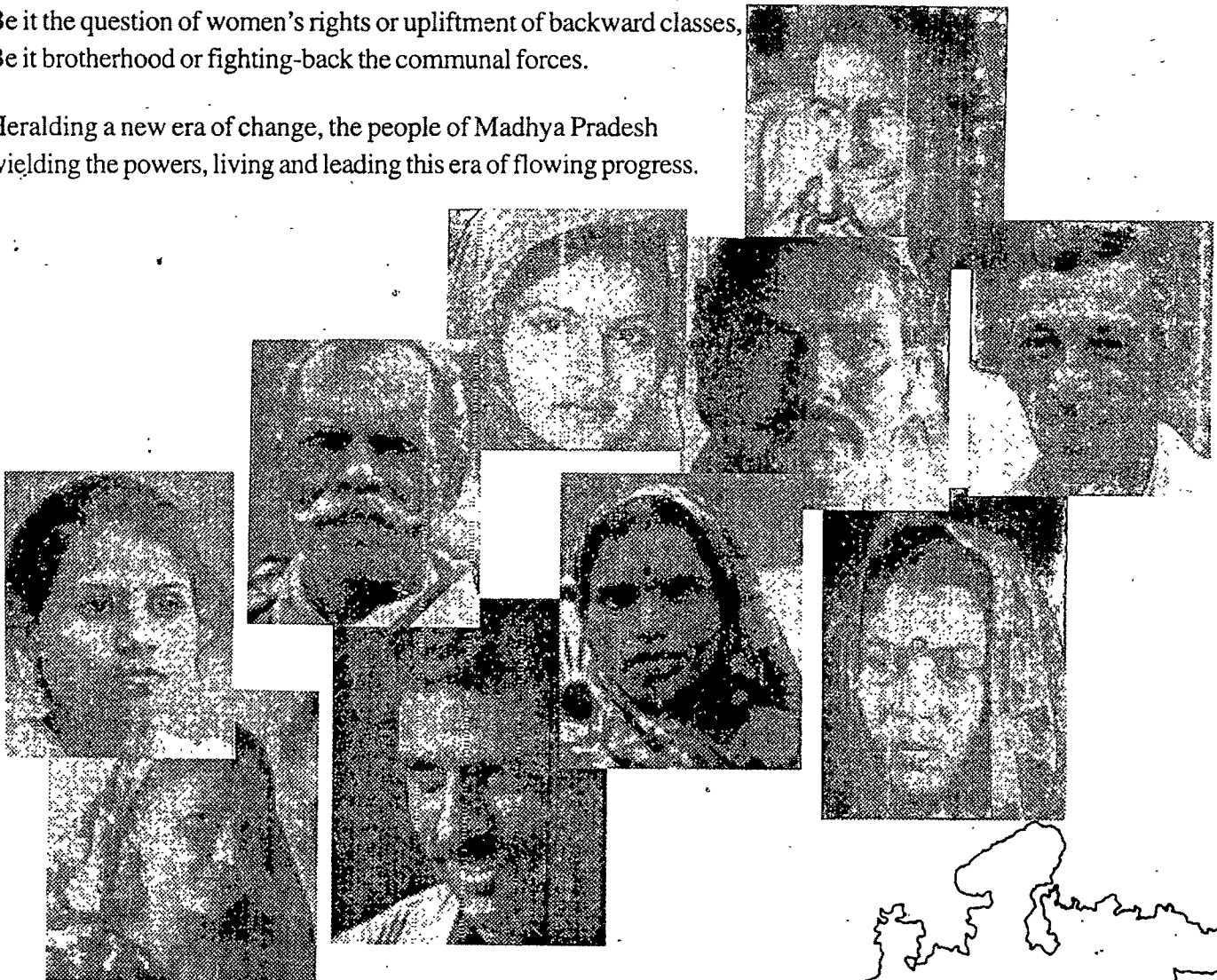
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Be it use of Information Technology for people's benefit or health,

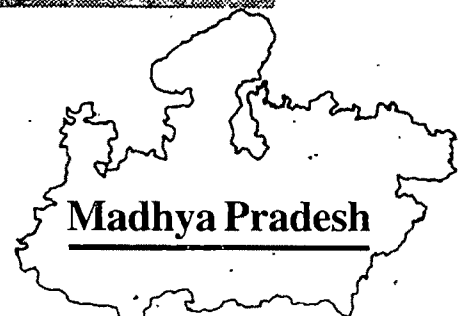
Be it the question of women's rights or upliftment of backward classes,

Be it brotherhood or fighting-back the communal forces.

Heralding a new era of change, the people of Madhya Pradesh  
wielding the powers, living and leading this era of flowing progress.



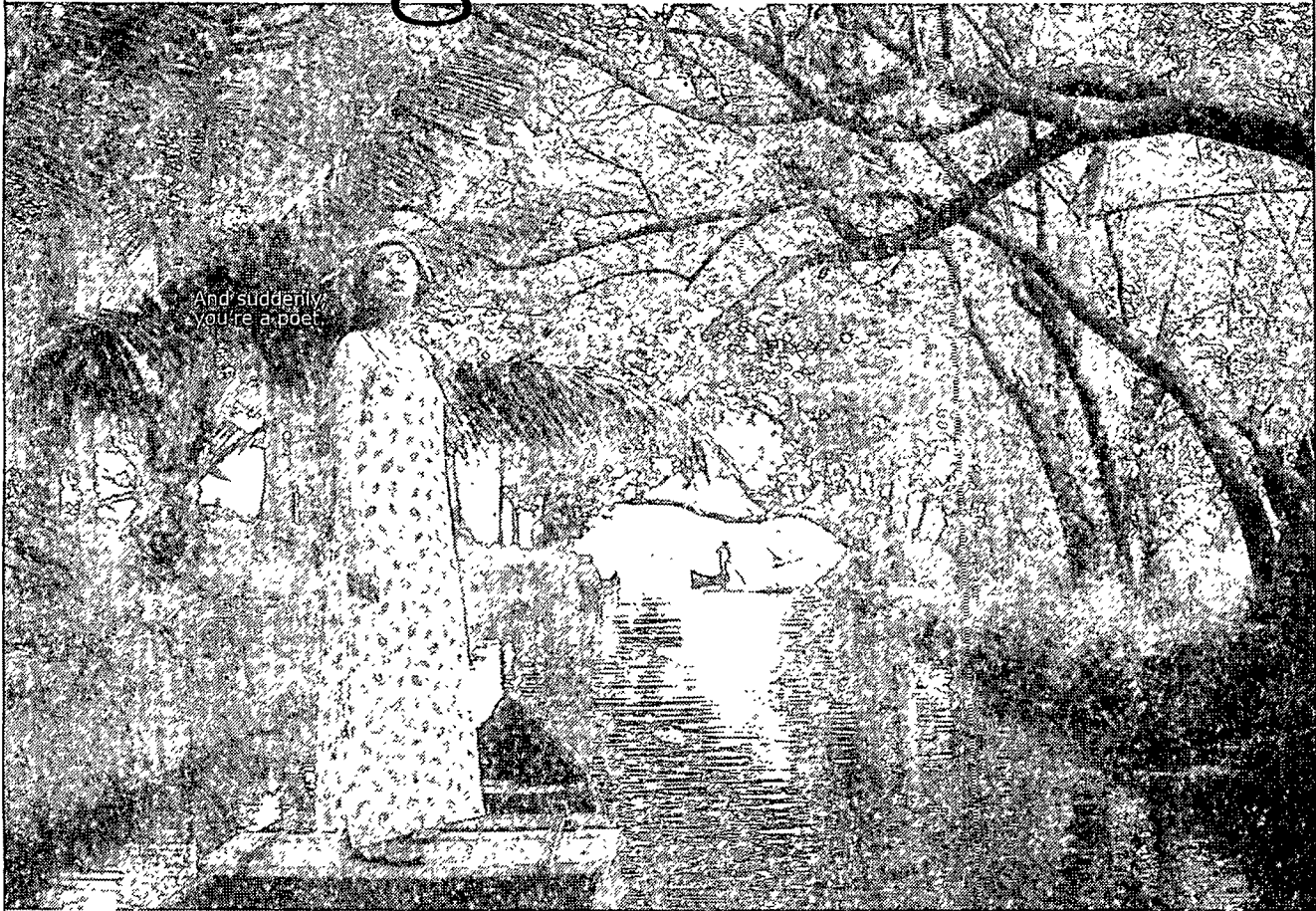
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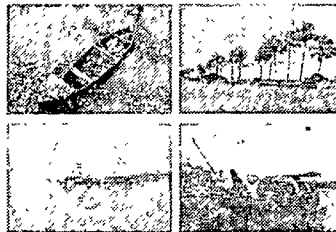


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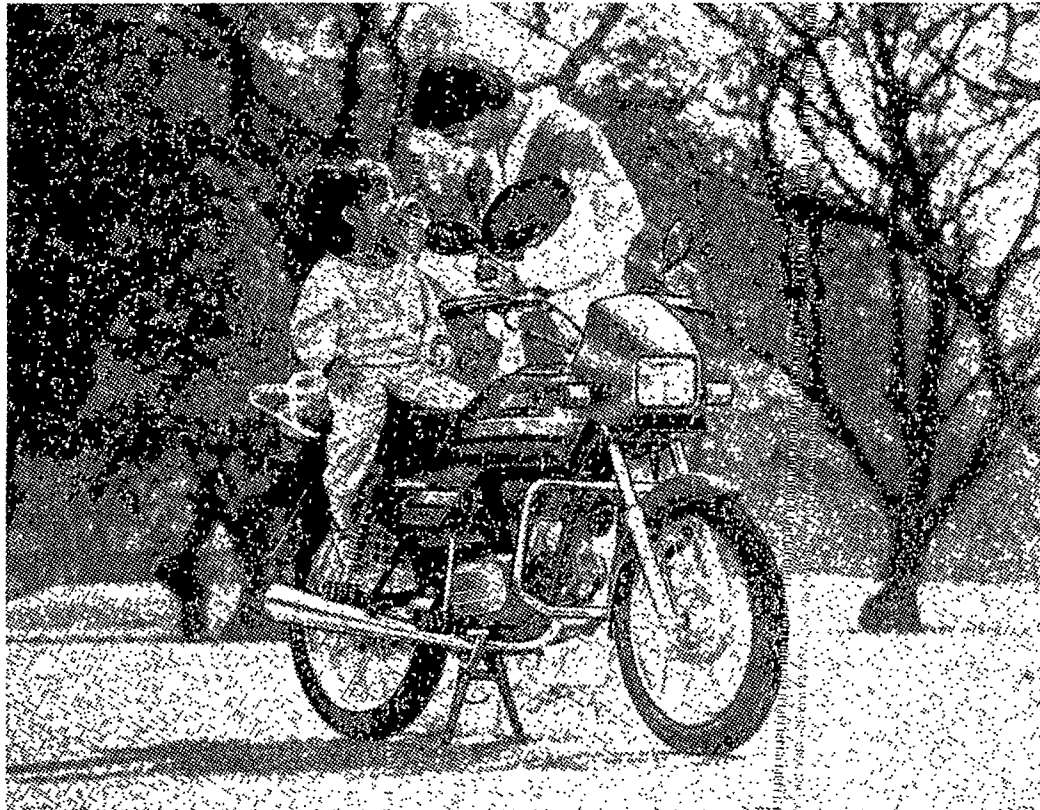
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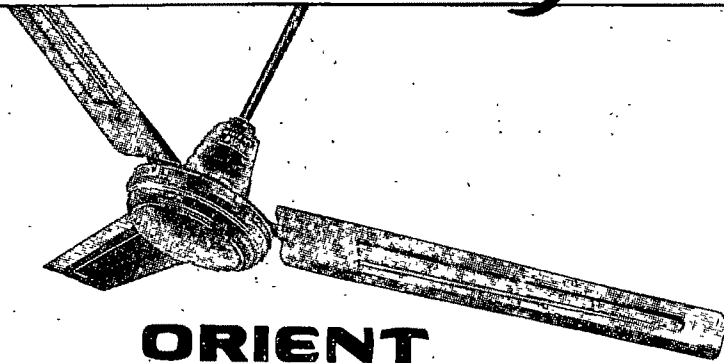


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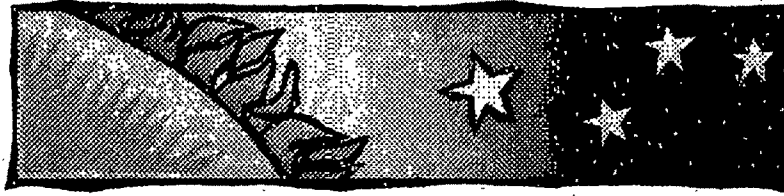


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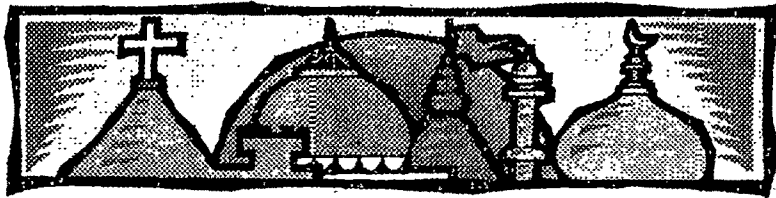
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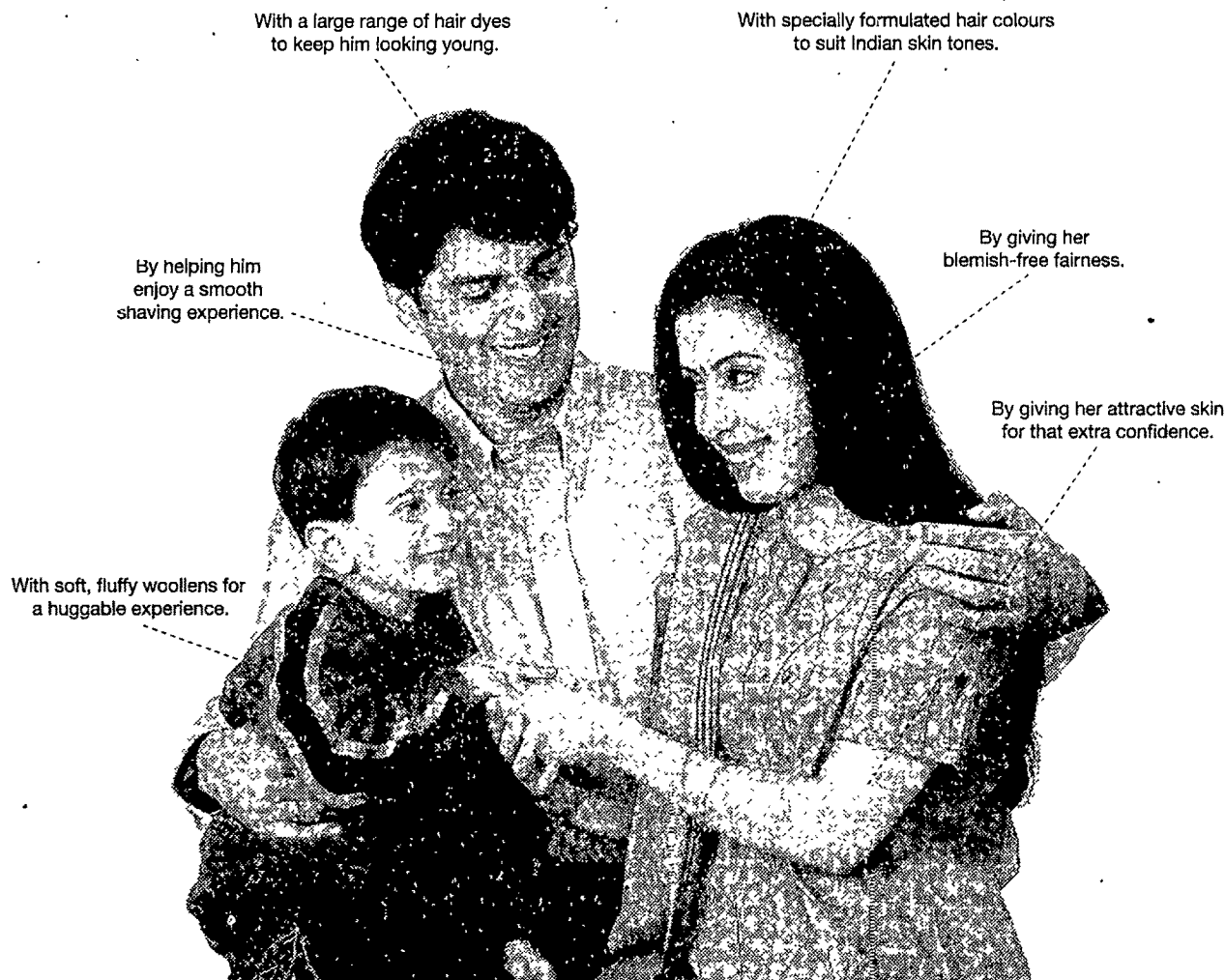


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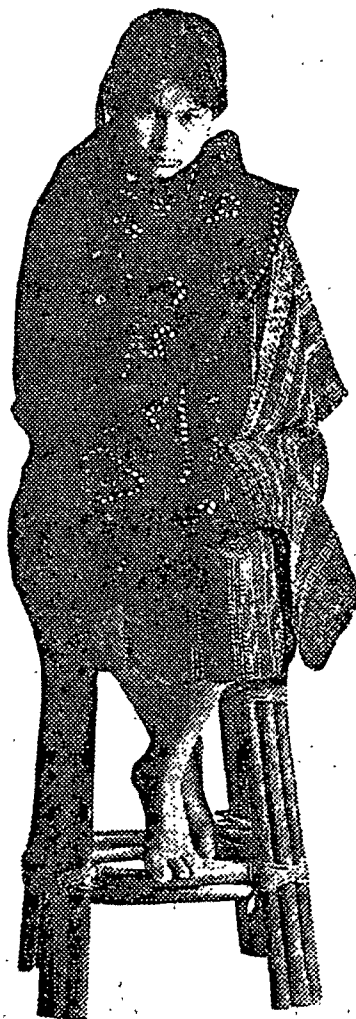
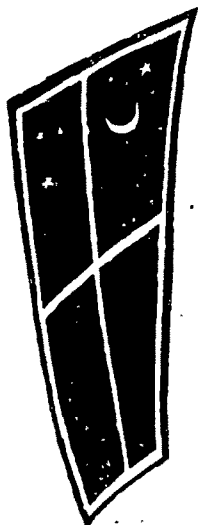


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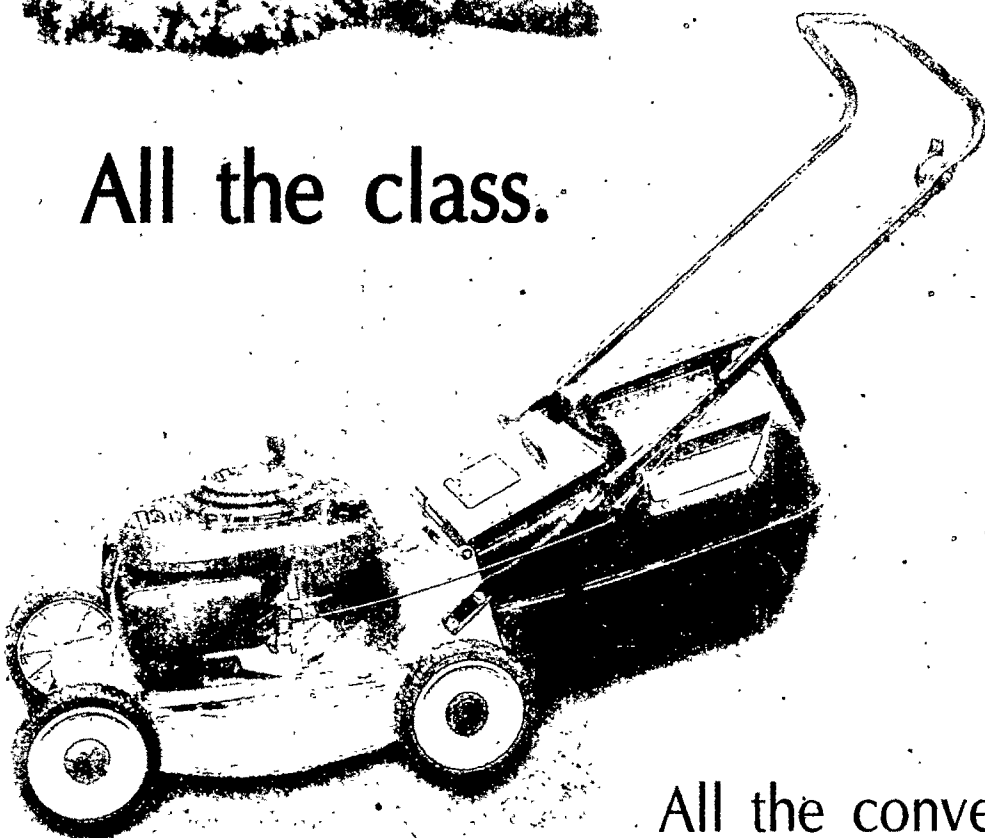
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publisher MALVIKA SINGH

editor TEJBIR SINGH

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circulation N.K. PILI

2-46 Malhotra Building, Janpath, New Delhi-110001; Telephone 23316534; Fax 011-23316445; E-mail seminar@vsnl.co  
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the place of cinema

in India

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## The problem

WHAT sort of an object is cinema in India?

In an article in 1995, Ashis Nandy described popular (Hindi-Urdu) cinema as being 'a slum's eye view of Indian politics.' 'Both the cinema and the slum in India show the same impassioned negotiation with everyday survival, the same mix of the comic and the tragic...' Even as this article was written, and increasingly so in the years that have passed since, this articulation has become much harder to make.

Present-day heroes, unlike their predecessors, move not from the village or the feudal *haveli* to the pleasures and dangers of 'big city' Bombay but negotiate a 'return' after studying in America, starting a big business in London and dancing on location in the Swiss Alps. The vigilante stakes himself, not for the neighbourhood but for the boundaries of an entire nation against the more ambiguous threat of 'terrorism', *a la* Sunny Deol. The mafiosi coordinates the contours of his 'company' on a cellphone with its branch offices in Hong Kong, Nigeria and Dubai. Homes become soft-focus saccharine, with expensive furniture and in-house gyms.

Bollywood gone (neo-liberal) global? A 'new' Indian modernity? Well perhaps, but then again, maybe not. Let us look more carefully at each of the terms in circulation here (cinema, global/local, 'Indian modernity') because it is possible that they elide as much as

they tell us. In fact, there are much more cataclysmic and tectonic shifts at work here in the nature of the 'popular'.

The object that Nandy, even till as recently as 1995, could refer to as 'cinema' has completely changed in its shape, form and mode of dispersal. Take the case of a recent film, *Kabhie Khushi Kabhie Gham* (K3G). Alongside his transnational presence in the film, Shahrukh Khan flows uninterrupted and simultaneous into to a Pepsi ad on Star Plus, a rerun of *Baazigar* on Sony TV into an Ericsson ad in *The Times of India*, only to reappear on the upper left corner of the MSN Hotmail India screensaver. Amitabh Bachchan plays an ageing corporate scion (getting over the failure of ABCL?) and benevolently distributes money and a few minutes of fame to the Indian middle class on *Kaun Banega Crorepati*. K3G the film, itself appears in only a fraction of the cinema halls in any of the big Indian cities on the day of its release, simultaneously screened with a shaky and uncertain print on TV by various cablewallahs, flooding various electronic bazaars soon after as an easily copied VCD, its songs long-since released (and 'pirated') on CD and cassette.

However, despite its seeming hyper-visibility, the importance of a film such as K3G might in itself be deeply undercut by the fact that references to the popu-

lar (bourgeois-Hindu) joint family are often not even made with respect to 'cinema' as such anymore, instead invoking serials on Star Plus such as *Kyonki Saas Bhi Kabhie Bahu Thi* and *Kahani Ghar Ghar Ki*. In a word, 'cinema' has become radically dispersed.

Analytically, how might one cope with this shift? The term used most often is the all-too-familiar global/local division. Rather than telling us anything about cinema or the popular, more often than not the neatness of this distinction suggests the naiveté of our own conception of what constitutes either end of this binary. Thus, Shakrukh Khan doing a stage show for a largely South Asian immigrant population in Birmingham is the 'globalization' of Bollywood, while an event such as the screening of *Magpie in the Hand* at Nishat Talkies, Kanpur, is merely 'local' (this is a film from the Czech Republic, imported by a distributor in Chandni Chowk, Delhi, given a name in English and a suggestively erotic poster, classified as 'adult' by the regulatory agencies of the Indian state and finally screened all over Delhi and U.P. as a 'morning show').

A similar problem crops up when we approach the term 'modernity', an almost absurd shorthand for an explosive diversity of practices and imaginations in operation at the level of the popular, not all of which can be neatly placed under the sign of the nation (i.e. within something called an 'Indian' modernity). At the

simplest level, an unproblematic movement from 'Bollywood' to 'Indian' cinema to 'modernity' ghettoizes a whole host of actually existing sites of film production and circulation as 'regional' in a deeply hierarchical political/cultural geography.

How do we move away from this set of problems? Here is an initial suggestion: we shift 'cinema' from its conception as a purely textual object to being a socially embedded set of practices. This is a shift away from the fictionality of cinema as a formal 'text' towards its *fictive* quality, its being 'made up' as a form on the terrain of life, labour and language. Here we hold these various terms in tension (local/global, Bollywood/regional, popular/parallel, highbrow/lowbrow, hit/flop), concentrating instead on the social contexts within which such categorizations are produced and the ways in which they circulate and travel.

Thus, while we do not negate the literary/aesthetic practice of 'reading' films, the practice of film 'criticism' or the theoretical-textual analysis of particular films would appear here as one among several other historically and socially located forms of commentary. As a way of relativizing 'ourselves', such a move demands a deeper engagement with the specificities unravelled by historical-archival/ethnographic research and requires that we pay attention to the ways in which these investigations often destabilize

the descriptive/analytical vocabulary we might otherwise take for granted. This issue of *Seminar* hopes to engage this move, drawing upon current research at the intersection of disciplines such as film and media studies, cultural studies, history and anthropology.

Let us discuss this move in slightly greater detail. Arguably, the cinematic form is *the* crucial structure of affect and mode of cultural experience within modernity. (Here 'modernity' might reappear as a useful term. Perhaps the problem with terms such as these is not that they have become *too* abstract, but rather that they have *not* become abstract enough.) How do we start unpacking the seemingly ubiquitous presence of the cinematic in our lives? To begin with we might make a distinction here: 'cinema', as a form of public culture, is not necessarily the same thing as 'film' (since a cinema-hall is now only one of several places where a film or its fragments might manifest themselves). The question of 'film' opens out in three intimately related directions: as a technology, as a commodity and lastly, as implicated within diverse modes of sociality. The first two nodes can be said to have a certain logic to them, while the last as a form of experience is perhaps the hardest to grasp. Each has its own politics.

In considering film as a technological form we come up against questions of movement, usage and regulation. Here we might look at the history of film in different parts of India: its entry as a colonial technology and its subsequent domestication; its gradual spatial establishment (in the form of the 'hall') in different localities and further, the ways in which these arrangements change, along with its past and present enmeshing with other technologies in the process of production and circulation (the radio, print cultures, television, internet).

At each stage these materialities are intertwined within particular discursive formations: debates on what its 'effects' might be, how such a technology could be used or appropriated by different social actors, how it might intersect with perceived 'indigenous' aesthetic forms and criteria etc. The node of the state, as a regulatory or 'visionary' body is quite crucial here (in spite of the fact that things usually operate far in excess of it). In thinking through these processes, we have a lot to draw upon from the existing work of writers such as Ravi Vasudevan, Ashish Rajadhyaksha Madhava Prasad and Stephen Hughes.

At particular junctures, how does the state envision its relationship to an emergent technological form? This could be in its use as a pedagogic device in the construction of an imagined community (as for exam-

ple, in the 'national integration' documentaries and newsreels which used to be compulsory screening at cinema-halls till a few years back). Or, in the development of a technological national-cultural 'art form' positioned against the pastiche and 'lack of realism' of the popular (most of the 'parallel cinema' movement was financially supported by the state, funding which has all but disappeared in recent times). How do these arrangements shift as the nature of the state alters?

A related question is that of policing and control as particular regimes of censorship are formed and claims to 'community' and 'morality' are negotiated (as certain images or narratives are classified as 'obscene' or 'inflammatory'). In each case these relationships and regulations are precarious achievements, requiring work to produce and sustain them, liable to shift across space and time depending on the uses to which they are put.

The question of usage and regulation brings us directly to the presence of film as a commodity: 'cinema' as a 'trade' involving particular forms of transaction, with differing use and exchange-values. What is the sort of social-historical/economic trajectory involved in as simple an act as paying the price of a ticket to enter a hall and watch a film 'first day first show', or alternatively in watching it on a TV channel run by the local cable operator? On what basis are relations of legality/non-legality ('piracy') constructed in these cases? Further, given the contingency and dispersion of actual viewing practices, how are categories such as 'hit/flop' or 'important/marginal' configured?

As even a cursory reading of any of the 'government committee reports' on film will tell us, any desire for predictability or completeness in our knowledge in this respect is resisted by the sheer size and scope of the apparatuses of film production, distribution and circulation in various parts of India. At best one can follow particular trajectories and their inter-connections. How is it that at a particular point in time, older Mithun Chakrabarty films (classified as the 'B-circuit' in film trade terminology) suddenly flooded cinema halls in Delhi four or five years after their release? How does the 'morning show' (classified as the 'C-circuit') emerge as a category of film viewership, enter cinema halls across various cities and towns and suddenly decline in its popularity? How do we understand the supposed 'success' (in terms of drawing upper-middle class audiences) of the 'multiplex' form of cinema exhibition in certain parts of India, and the concomitant emergence of a type of film marketed as a 'niche' product, just as the economic aspect of cinema was

declared to be in 'crisis'? At what point do music rights and product placements become as profitable a venture for a film producer as box-office returns, traditionally the measure of a 'hit'?

To open up the question on to a broader terrain: how does film get entangled, both in its creation and in its circulation, with other commodity forms? As with other commodities, what is its place in dispersed 'shadow' economies? This could be right from the purchase of a ticket in 'black' outside a cinema hall, to inflated film pricing by a producer, or even to the alleged links with 'the mafia' in the production process of many recent films.

There are many more such questions to be answered and conceived. What we have in each of these cases is the complex entanglement of modes of circulation, film exhibition and distribution. Having said this, it is equally important to remember, as Arjun Appadurai has pointed out, that a commodity necessarily has a 'social life'. And perhaps more than in any other case, the importance of this insight is crucial for our understandings of film/cinema.

This takes us to our third opening: the implication of film within diverse modes of sociality, forms of experience and ways of being in the world. What are the ways in which people engage with film? How does cinema relate to subjectivity? Once we have disarticulated the cinematic form, as a specific technological apparatus from 'film', how might we re-configure that relationship? For example, what do we make of the repetition of images from the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s on cable TV, their packaging as 'nostalgia', or even the constant replaying of their sounds in game shows based on the 'Antakshari' format? Might this have something to do with the ways in which 'public' memory arranges itself in the entanglements between the 'past' and the 'present'? In other words, might this form of film circulation shape, and be shaped by, a complex relation between cultural time and the image?

Perhaps the main reason that this third node is the hardest to grasp is the lack of a clear political antagonist. While with 'technology' there is the overarching relationship with the state, and with commodities there are the forces of commerce, here the domain of the political (or the personal-political) takes us in at least three different directions. To begin with there is the question of 'ideology'. Here the film writer attempts to speak the 'unsaid' in 'unmasking' what the cinema assumes or foregrounds in the worlds that it depicts. Having recognized this as a valid and quite often usefully provocative domain (refer to the *Roja*

debate in the further reading list), let us not leave the cinematic form with only one particular version of politics (or philosophy): one that is based on the relationship between 'truth' and representation (a question that is not necessarily *always* relevant to the cinema as a form).

A slightly different analytical emphasis takes us to the level of micro-practices where the political stakes are as crucial. Here we attend to the ways in which people position or embody themselves (or are marked) as bearers of identity within particular social or institutional networks. A parliamentary debate of 1952 on cinema contains a reference to a public petition by '13,000 housewives of Delhi protesting the evil of cinema.' What might occasion such an utterance?

Clearly, there is some indication here between locality and the everyday into which cinema enters as a space and form of public congregation. How do these relationships shift over time? How do different junctures create particular modes of reception, delineate identifiable (or imagined) 'audiences' and constitutively shape notions of public culture? Here again, we might draw upon the existing work of writers such as M.S.S. Pandian and S.V. Srinivas on the 'fan' phenomenon in Tamil and Telugu cinema respectively or Madhava Prasad's use of government committee reports and film trade magazines to understand practices of reception.

Having recognized this second domain of inquiry, a different set of problems confronts us as we move to the third opening within the 'personal' that I want to outline here, approaching what Michel Foucault has called 'techniques of the self'. There is a peculiar problem when we approach the sublime, almost inexpressible dimension of 'experience', since inasmuch as 'cinema' is the object of investigation here, we are equally exploring ourselves. And perhaps, there is no better way to illustrate this than to recollect an image from my own life. I remember, minutes after my father's death in February 1998, sitting in an ambulance taking my father's body from the hospital to the *ghat* for cremation. And my mother, sitting next to me, holding his hand, singing *Aanchal ke Tujhe*, the Kishore Kumar song from the film *Door Gagan ki Chaon Mei*. A form of mourning uniquely appropriate to our fondest memories of him, singing that song. A song that is itself strangely ethical in its lyrics and in the affect it produces: it reminds us to care for the world and for relationships.

Though I never saw the film, my father told me numerous times: in the film, this is a song Kishore

Kumar sings to Amit Kumar, his son in 'real' life. This was a fact we all considered important, for no reason in particular. Here is experience in its barest, albeit most complex and multi-layered form. 'Life', as we rarely feel it, usually in its abrupt proximity to death. And here is cinema, so pure that it lives not in 'ideology' but in the deepest recesses of our beings: in how we learn to express and inhabit intimacy, in the ways in which we are produced as subjects of life and language. And further, here is something singularly unique to cinema in India. (Can we imagine Hollywood or even the acclaimed French new wave cinema providing any one with such kinds of emotional/expressive resources? Perhaps, but that would involve a completely different form of life.)

Speaking of 'our unique' capabilities should take us back somewhat naturally to Ashis Nandy who, in fact, is probably the first to show us this very dimension of Indian cinema as a 'resource' in his essay, 'The Discreet Charms of Indian Terrorism'. A different and perhaps more intricate way into this set of questions is offered by Veena Das in her piece, 'The Making of Modernity: Gender and Time in Indian Cinema' (refer to the further reading list for these references). In further understanding the question of cinema/experience we might learn a lot from writers such as Gilles Deleuze, Stanley Cavell and Steven Shaviro (or even Walter Benjamin on the 'image'), who have, in their explorations of European and American cinematic forms, considered the ontological status of film as a visual-aural form of human negotiation. The cinematic 'machine', as Deleuze has called it, that produces concepts, percepts, affects, forms of life and modes of being-in-world.

In the above cases, the theoretical impulse comes from within a set of (western?) philosophical problems in their relation to the cinematic, as a form of expression within modernity. Can such frameworks illuminate the peculiar contours of the cinematic within India? At present it is best to leave this question open, recognizing the degree of complexity posed by it. What is important is to find ways of addressing these complexities, since if there is anything at all that we do know about 'Indian' modernity (even if we are opposed to it being conceived of as any one thing), it is that cinema is a crucially important node within it, perhaps even *the* crucial node of the 'popular' imagination, figuring far more centrally here than in any other postcolonial context.

In this case, there is good reason to be optimistic about our own as yet nascent intellectual tradition, since

the corpus of writing on cinema in India already constitutes a formidable body of work. Apart from the writers mentioned above (Vasudevan, Rajadhyaksha, Pandian, et al.) whose work in any given text cuts across at least two of the three broad domains outlined here, there are several others: Tejaswini Niranjana, Moinak Biswas, Lalitha Gopalan, Rosie Thomas and Ranjani Mazumdar are only a few of the people who have been writing for some time now. My own engagement with the cinema emerges from a brief but intense involvement with a media/urban studies project, 'Publics and Practices in the History of the Present' at Sarai-CSDS (Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, Delhi).

In the context of this emergent approach, let us reiterate the kind of move that is being addressed i.e., the 'problem' we are trying to pose for writing on cinema in India. While drawing upon forms of analysis which consider questions of 'textual' address and relational/possible subject positions (in terms of a 'look' or a 'gaze') there is a somewhat different impetus here in trying to move away from the purely interpretative stance that those engagements invariably involve. Instead of revelling purely in the mastery of the film writer as an adept 'reader' of cinematic 'texts', we hope to multiply and alter the set of questions as anthropological/historical (or philosophical?) ones in order to ask: how have people spoken about and lived with the cinema? Since inasmuch as people produce cinema, a cinema can produce them. And this is perhaps the most crucial question of all in understanding the place of cinema in India.

In addressing the complexities of these various circulations we might also learn from people 'within' the apparatus of film, broadly conceived, in order to understand the kinds of knowledge they generate and draw upon in their diverse localities and positions. This could be anyone from a film writer or a poster designer to a film distributor, a booking clerk or a cinema-hall manager. In my own ethnographic engagements in Delhi, cinema-hall owners and managers regularly complained about the decline of the cinematic form, the 'death' of cinema as a viewing practice and their own decreasing importance as 'public' figures in their respective localities. It is within these subjective perspectives that we might be able to trace a deeper relationship between the cinematic and the social. It is with these multiple directions in mind that this issue of *Seminar* hopes to start a conversation.

BHRIGUPATI SINGH



# This thing called Bollywood

MADHAVA PRASAD

**BOLLYWOOD**; what a strange name! But stranger still is the wide acceptance that the term has gained over the last few years in a country where the dominant prevailing view is that Indian popular cinema is an entirely indigenous product. Today, not only the English language media which is probably the term's original habitat, but also the Indian language press, not only journalists but also film scholars employ this term to talk about Indian popular cinema. Is this a name that incorporates a criticism?

Is it meant to suggest that the cinema is imitative and therefore deserves to be rechristened to highlight this derivativeness? Or is it in fact the opposite: an attempt to indicate a difference internal to the dominant idiom, a variation that is related to but distinct from the globally hegemonic Hollywood? Is it Indian cinema's way of signifying its difference or is it (inter)national film journalism and scholarship's way of reinscribing the difference that Indian cinema represents within an articulated model of global hegemony and resistance?

It is natural that those who have invested in earlier models of the Indian popular cinema – the 'so many cinemas' model, the folk culture model, the 'yeh-to-public-hai-yeh-sab-janti-hai' model, the regressive 'pulse of the peo-

ple' model, the ideological model, art versus popular, and so on, should feel slightly resentful of this development which threatens to absorb their own special areas into its commodious (because ill-defined) purview. Bollywood in that sense is not a term with a specific signified: an empty signifier, it can be applied to any set of signifieds within the realm of Indian cinema.

Contrary to what we might expect, it does not, for instance, explicitly exclude the middle/art genres from its field. It belongs to an order of signifiers that seems to want to 'capture a mood or style', rather than designate a piece of reality. I too, like Ashish Rajadhyaksha in his thoughtful piece on the topic,<sup>1</sup> not to mention Ajay Devgan in a recent interview, have felt resentment and indignation at what seems to be a callous act of symbolic abduction. Here, however, I want to take a deep breath and take another look at the matter.

The term Bollywood has crept into the vocabulary of the Anglophone national culture slowly and steadily, almost without anybody noticing it.

1. Ashish Rajadhyaksha, 'The "Bollywoodisation" of the Indian Cinema: Cultural Nationalism in a Global Arena', in Preben Karsholm (ed.), *City Flicks: Cinema, Urban Worlds and Modernities in India and Beyond*. International Development Studies, Roskilde University Occasional Paper #22, 2002.

Like certain processes of which we become aware only when they are almost over, we are right now witness to the naturalisation of 'Bollywood' as the designation for what was previously known as Hindi cinema, Bombay cinema, Indian popular cinema, etc. It is tempting to think that this process of near-universal legitimisation of 'Bollywood' is a symptom of some other social and cultural processes which have a wider significance. Can linguistic change be an index of social transformations and if so, how do we make sense of them?

**T**hat a change of name might indicate some change in the reality to which it refers is now a quite widely accepted idea. Thus we might look at the cinema produced by the Bombay film industry and the other industries too, which, as far as this new will-to-name is concerned, are more of the same. And indeed, we do find, do we not, that this cinema has given us, in the last decade or so, a large number of films which may be said to constitute a new genre of sorts, which has been, moreover, the staple of the new global Bollywood presence.

It is hardly necessary to list them, so widely recognized are these films which, like teachers in Bangalore schools, are known by their initials. They have figured prominently in the emerging new culture of India, where consumer capitalism has finally succeeded in weaning the citizens away from a strongly entrenched culture of thrift towards a system of gratification more firmly in its (capitalism's) own long-term control. They have produced yet another variation of the nationalist ideology of tradition and modernity, and, most interestingly, they have relocated what we might call the seismic centre of Indian national identity somewhere in Anglo-America.

In other words, it has brought the NRI decisively into the centre of the picture, as a more stable figure of Indian identity than anything that can be found indigenously. In this regard, the NRI productions themselves have lately become more important than the indigenous ones which, with a few exceptions like DDLJ, continue to pose the 'return to roots' as the redeeming factor in tales of dislocation. The recent success of *Bend it Like Beckham* is an obvious indicator of how the NRI is once again functioning as a facilitator in the transition to a new mode of self-relation. 'Once again', because the last time it was as television personalities that young NRIs held our hands when we were trying to find our bearings in an MTV world.

**W**hile economists continue to be skeptical about NRI patriotism making a difference to FDI, culturally it is indisputable that the NRI is increasingly beginning to look like the sole guarantor of Indian identity. Like the characters in Indo-Persian fables, whose life-source is hidden in a tree guarded by serpents in a dangerous jungle seven seas and many adventures away, the Indian's identity it would seem is, for the first time, safe in the hands of the NRI.<sup>2</sup>

Could Bollywood be a name for this new cinema, coming from Bombay but also, lately, from London and Canada, which has over the last ten years or so, produced a new self-image for the Indian middle class? It is undeniable that this is at least partly the case. But in fact the term claims a

2. Not that we don't have our grievances. For it also seems to be the case that NRIs seem to thrive on their ignorance, whereas the rest of us tend to feel crippled by ours. As Salman Rushdie has demonstrated, not only knowledge, but also ignorance can be power, if you know how to use it and if you have a captive market. Did he not show that by knowing nothing about Indian literatures, he in a way knew

much larger footprint than that: it is used to refer to Indian popular cinema in general, and more particularly the Hindi variety. It is not a name designed to highlight a new reality alone, although that new reality is one of the factors in its success. For naming is not only about the reality that is designated, but about the will of the one who names, the will to reconstitute an existing reality in its own image.

**T**he origin of the term being obscure, there have been many claimants to the credit for coining it, and many theories as to its first usage. But now we may actually be in a position to settle this issue, at the risk of offending some claimants. In 1932, Wilford E. Deming, an American engineer who claims that 'under my supervision was produced India's first sound and talking picture', writing in *American Cinematographer* (12.11, March 1932), mentions a telegram he received as he was leaving India after his assignment: Tollywood sends best wishes happy new year to Lubill film doing wonderfully records broken.<sup>3</sup> In explanation, he adds, 'In passing it might be explained that our Calcutta studio was located in the suburb of Tollygunge... Tolly being a proper name and Gunge meaning locality. After studying the advantages of Hollygunge we decided on Tollywood. There being two stu-

them better than anyone else? Would he have traded in that felicitous ignorance for all the knowledge in the world? It is doubtful. Sometimes we also feel that they get so preoccupied servicing the Anglo-American demand for Raj nostalgia that they forget about us, making us feel neglected. But in spite of all these grouches, there is a recognition that the NRI, as the figure who sustains one's ideological presence in the world, is indispensable. A lot of the attraction for 'Bollywood', it seems to me, has to do with the same politics of recognition that is a key animating factor in the Indian English literary economy.

3. I thank Madhuja Mukherjee for drawing my attention to this article.

dios at present in that locality, and several more projected, the name seems appropriate.' Thus it was Hollywood itself, in a manner of speaking, that, with the confidence that comes from global supremacy, renamed a concentration of production facilities to make it look like its own baby.

**D**eming is renaming the locality, but there is no suggestion here that the name will also serve as an adjective to describe Indian cinema in general (although Calcutta in those days was still a strong centre of production). This gells very well with what I seem to remember from occasionally glancing at a Kolkata based youth magazine called JS (or Junior Statesman, a publication of the Statesman group which, long before satellite television and MTV, was addressed to what must have been a very small elite Indian youth segment) which referred to the Bengali film industry as Tollywood. 'Bollywood' is most likely to have come into existence by this route, because there is no obvious way to get from Bombay to Bollywood directly.

Once Tollywood was made possible by the fortuitous availability of a half-rhyme, it was easy to clone new Hollywood babies by simply replacing the first letter. I suspect (thus adding my own origin story to the many that are in existence) that it was the trendy and smart young JS journalists who first adopted this way of slotting Hindi cinema into their otherwise largely Eurocentric cultural world. It is thus a symptom of the affectionate lampooning that the Anglophone middle class subjected the Hindi cinema to in reviews, articles and private conversations. It is a word that denotes the user's distance from the object, a non-participatory passion for description.

Thus 'Bollywood' bears a relation to the structural bilingualism

of the Indian nation state. Structural bilingualism is a state of affairs where the multitude of Indian languages (here counted as one) are held together by a metalanguage in which alone the national ideology can be properly articulated. In this respect Hindi cinema has witnessed a very significant transformation in recent periods: The undisputed role of Urdu as the metalanguage of Hindi cinema's ideological work has now been challenged by English. Of course, it is difficult to conceive of Urdu being replaced by English in a film without it becoming an 'English film', but it is nevertheless the case that English provides the ideological coordinates of the new world of the Hindi film.

**L**ove, rather than *pyar*, *mohabbat* or *ishq* is today the reigning signifier for the privileged affect. English phrases and proverbs are liberally used to construct a web of discourse which the characters inhabit. The charms of Urdu, of course, continue to command a good price, but the language has now been reduced to its accumulated stocks of nostalgic sentiment. The old three language formula of filmi Indian nationalism, for instance, has imperceptibly undergone a change: today, posters and credits no longer carry the title in Urdu script as a matter of routine. But structural bilingualism has a significance at a different level: today, it is the will of the English speaking classes that prevails in giving a name and an identity to the Hindi cinema.

Ajay Devgan recently told an interviewer that he disapproved of the use of 'Bollywood' to refer to Hindi films. There is a lot of resentment against it, but it cannot be said that the industry has had no role to play in the popularisation of its usage. This brings us to the other means by which the word has been legitimized, of

which we will briefly look at two: the discovery of Hindi cinema by some foreign directors, which leads to a reification of its most obvious distinguishing properties as constituting its permanent identity; and the generational changes within the industry, which have brought to the limelight a group of sons of industry magnates and others similarly placed, as well as new generations of stars, most of whom are educated in elite schools, if not abroad.

**R**ecently, much was made of the presence of a Hindi film song on the soundtrack of *Moulin Rouge*, and similar examples are mentioned from various parts of the world. *Moulin Rouge*, for all its novelty, was a straightforward Hollywood musical, and in spite of the Hindi song, the Indian excitement about it being inspired by Hindi cinema was a bit desperate to say the least. It is not clear what is expected of such pieces of news, what salvation they promise and to whom. Certainly there is a desire to establish Indian cinema as unique and deserving of international acclaim, which no doubt it is. But one suspects that this is one more of those postcolonial fixations which keep us within range of the master's gaze and protect us from the threat of freedom.

One of the consequences of this is that Indian cinema is completely stripped of any possible *historicity*. Any hint of historical change would turn Hindi cinema into something without an innate Indian essence, something that changes with time, thus detracting from the key ideas on which this whole thing rests: that Indian popular cinema is based on epic structures, puranic themes, and Sanskrit dramaturgy – all highly dubious and usually intuitively generated truisms. Interestingly, while 'Bollywood' tries to capture these

very enduring qualities of Indian popular cinema, this object itself is now in the process of undergoing a major transformation, as audiences fragment into class specific segments.

**W**hile a lot of popular writing reflects such 'Bollywood' sentiment, we should locate the work of NRI directors like Mira Nair, Deepa Mehta, Gurinder Chaddha and Nagesh Kukunoor in this tendency as well. Mehta, of course, has given ample indication of this line of thinking in her latest *Hollywood/Bollywood* but the films of Mira Nair, and Chaddha's *Bend it Like Beckham* are also indicative of a similar proclivity. One can imagine that while these filmmakers would frown upon the regressive ideologies of Bollywood, they would join the chorus of appreciation for its energy and exuberance which they try to reproduce in their films.<sup>4</sup>

Devgan's irritation is a sign that there is a struggle over representation in which the opponents of 'Bollywood' are definitely losing to the combination of industry sons, film magazines (which like the convenience of the term), overseas Indians who have concerns about identity, and other cultural forces that have emerged in tandem with the new global culture. For these latter, 'Bollywood' seems to offer the

possibility of a way of accessing the 'home culture' for their own needs in a globalized world.

**W**hen we lament this change, we tend to participate in the same fantasy of unchanging essence that sustains the new realities symptomized by Bollywood. As a variant of international melodrama from the early capitalist era, Indian popular cinema did not undergo formal transformations comparable to those that signalled the advent of realism, an aesthetic of immanence cut off from the pre-modern sources of symbolic meaning. Thus it would be a mistake to regard the thematic elements of Indian popular cinema as reflecting the social realities of their time. Most of the thematic elements are variants of the ones popularized by stage melodrama in 19th century Europe. We need to attend to changes at the formal level in order to grasp their relationship to the reality they inhabit. At this level, we do see periodic shifts and modifications of form.

'Bollywood' would be interesting to investigate as the symptom of such a formal transformation, understanding form not only as a dimension of textuality, but also in a larger sense as the set of relations between the elements internal to the text as well as those which constitute its habitat: its audiences, its economic structure, its ideological matrix etc. Approached from this angle, 'Bollywood' may well provide insights into the chang-

acknowledging *Celebration*, just so that she could be the first Indian director to have done so. Such pioneering is one of the highlights of this new climate: recently television and the press gave much coverage to the insufferable *Jism* because its directors claimed to have dealt with sex 'in a mature fashion'. What they had done was to camouflage their badly plagiarized thriller with some agreeable angst about the lures of the *jism*: hardly an original topic.

ing modalities of Indian national identity in a globalizing world.

Related to the above, 'Bollywood' also signals the advent of a certain reflexivity, becoming a cinema for itself as it were, recognizing its own unique position in the world, the contrastive pleasures and values that it represents vis-à-vis Hollywood. This reflexivity is as much a form of self-awareness as it is a know-how that enables the Hindi film to reproduce itself for a market that demands its perpetuation as a source of cultural identity.

**I**n some recent films we get a distinct feeling that the intelligences involved in their production had bought into the Bollywood theory about songs in films, rather than spontaneously making films with songs which might have been the situation in earlier times. The desire for Bollywood is thus a desire for the reproduction of the difference that it represents on a world platform, which the industry itself, in its current reflexive moment, is responding to. It is this reflexivity and the demand it is responding to that can be said to constitute the very stuff of the new NRI film.

But there are other dynamics at work which are invested in transforming the Indian cinema scene, of getting rid of the old formats and establishing new logics of cultural production. Of course, people will continue to use the same term, Bollywood, even for this trend, since as we have noted above, it does not commit itself to any restrictive meaning. Nevertheless the box office statistics seem to indicate that there is another way of classifying the products of Bombay which will give us another map of the territory, such as the one Rajadhyaksha has tried to delineate, which will reveal objective limits to the scope of the term Bollywood and the fantasy that it embodies.

4. Interestingly, these filmmakers, especially Mehta and Nair, seem unable to escape a developmental approach. Thus in Mehta's *Fire*, the characters lament that there is no word in their language (which they are not speaking at that point) for lesbianism: a statement that could only be generated by and for the classic developmental gaze. Thus getting our government translators to coin a word for lesbianism would be a development project. Similarly, as these directors, for commercial or other reasons, have begun to identify more and more with India, they see themselves as innovators, introducing new elements into Indian culture. Thus Mehta 'introduced' lesbian sexuality as a theme in Indian cinema, and Nair, in a rush job, quickly introduced and resolved the theme of incestuous child abuse, without

# Cinema in urban space

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A SIGNIFICANT strand of research in cinema studies has been devoted to understanding cinema experience in terms of the logic of exhibition practices. Recent research on the cinemas of Delhi gives us a sense of the range of methods used.<sup>1</sup> The scholarship has looked at trade and local newspapers to understand how different genres and film circuits target particular audience segments. Trade associations and their proceedings have been explored for the main practices and players in the constitution of the trade. Municipal holdings relating to land acquisition and allocation, licensing, clearances around

health, sanitation and fire have been analyzed to get a sense of the policies determining the institution and location of cinema theatres, their regulation and reproduction.

In the Indian context, where the trade archives are not systematically organized and preserved, and the municipal archives are not easy to access, perhaps most important has been the recourse to field research. This means extended interviews with trade professionals at various levels to cull a sense of the history of the trade and how it has changed over time: cinema owners, managers and workers, booking agents, distributors, publicity people. It also entails thick descriptions of everyday practices of work, organisation, cultural engagement and spatial networks.

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1. The reference here is to work being undertaken by the Sarai programme of the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies. All references to Delhi's cinema history come from ongoing work by the Sarai project, 'Publics and practices in the history of the present: old and new media in contemporary India'. The research team includes Bhrigupati Singh, Bhagwati Prasad, Faizan Ahmed, Lokesh

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Sharma, Puloma Pal, Rakesh Kumar Singh, Ritika Shrimali, Ravi Sundaram and Ravi Vasudevan.

One of the conundrums of this research focus has been the reconciling of this exercise, a social and institutional history of the cinema,<sup>2</sup> with some of the traditional focuses of cinema studies. These include the interpretation of films in terms of their formal strategies and the way they place spectators in terms of social and political perception; and, more generally, an understanding of the significance of cinema as a technology of modern experience. As an apparatus which orchestrates sense perception and plays with perceptions of presence and absence, it has often been argued that the cinema is involved in a fundamental transformation of the horizons of human experience.<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps the reconciliation lies in the field of reception studies. How do audiences understand, interpret and experience films? How does the sensory field relayed by cinema relate to or impinge on our everyday rhythms of being? For example, how does going to the cinema relate to the sensory experience of cities, from the tactility of crowds to intimations of anonymity, the heightened registers of shock and speed, and the experience of simultaneity relayed through modern communication technologies?

2. Douglas Gomery and Robert C. Allen, *Film History – Theory and Practice*, Knopf, 1985, would be a standard text in this tradition; also see Douglas Gomery, 'Movie Audiences, Urban Geography, and the History of the American Film, *The Velvet Light Trap*, 19, 1982; *Shared Pleasures: History of Movie Presentation in the United States*, University of Wisconsin Press, 1993; Robert Allen, 'Motion Picture Exhibition in Manhattan, 1906-12', *Cinema Journal* 28 (2), 1979; Mark Jancovich and Lucy Faire with Sarah Stubblings, *The Place of the Audience: Cultural Geographies of Film Consumption*, London, BFI, 2003.

3. For an account of this divide between film history and film theory, see Thomas Elsaesser, 'The New Film History', *Sight And Sound*, Autumn 1986.

The history of exhibition tracks the way films are shown in particular theatres or theatre clusters, and perhaps at different times of the day, to capture a sense of how the trade mobilizes cinema into the social domain. It would appear logical enough that reception analysis should be able to render the experience of audiences within this spatial order, and in ways that might be at variance with the trade imagination.<sup>4</sup>

Film scholars have used a host of sophisticated viewer response techniques. These include analysis of surveys of audience response undertaken by the industry and government in the USA and Britain; and a close reading of film periodicals and fan magazines, film reviews, viewers' letters and popular star biographies. Interestingly, direct interviews have often been only one amongst these techniques and, arguably, not necessarily the most successful. Complex ethnographic approaches suggest how viewers often feel compelled to express certain opinions. This has included, remarkably, and suspiciously, a condemnation of cinema going as time wasting and morally suspect by regular film viewers in a Tamil city.<sup>5</sup>

Further, the spectators' memory of the cinema may be clouded with a nostalgic reverie that often simplifies interpretations, as in the often-voiced contrast made between the quality of an earlier cinema and its present degradation. This suggests that however intricate the domain of reception analysis and indeed of an analysis of the trade imagination, interpretation, making sense of these materials, is inescapable.

4. For a survey of the issues and methods, Judith Mayne, *Cinema and Spectatorship*, Routledge, 1993.

5. Sarah Dickey, *Cinema and the Urban Poor*, Cambridge University Press, 1991.

While the empirical tracking of viewer reception is a complicated task, even more is capturing the experience of cinema. It's notable how some of the most suggestive analysis of this experience has come from the annals of intellectual writing on the cinema rather than popular accounts. This includes evocations of the ramifications of the cinema experience for a modern sensorium in writers such as Benjamin, Kracauer, Brecht, the Russian avant-gardists of the 1920s.<sup>6</sup> Linkages have also been made between key dimensions in the experience of modernity and the initial impact of the cinema. Take for example the shock and trauma of the railway and automobile accident, catastrophes that underline the very contingency of life under modern technological transformations, and recall the audience that runs out of the auditorium as the train heads towards the camera in the early Lumiere brothers' film *Arrival at the Railway Station*.<sup>7</sup> This association between cinema and modern experience has provided a very creative entry point into the study of early cinema.

Similarly, research has tracked how transformation of cinematic technologies have altered experience through sound, colour, widescreen formats, heightened camera mobility as in steadicam, special effects and digital technologies. And there has been a new focus on how the cinema interacts with the configuration of entertainment and consumer sensoria,

6. e.g., Yuri Tsivian, *Early Cinema in Russia and its Cultural Reception*, Routledge, New York, London, 1994; 'Early Russian Cinema', by Siegfried Kracauer in, *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays* edited by Thomas Y. Levin, Harvard University Press, 1995 and other essays.

7. Lynne Kirby, *Parallel Tracks: The Railroad and Silent Cinema*, Duke University Press, Durham, N.C., 1997.

as with the history of shop window displays,<sup>8</sup> theme parks and roller coaster rides<sup>9</sup> (something recently invoked to situate Spielberg's *Jurassic Park* films). The film's intersections with other media forms and visual industries such as music, fashion and advertising have also made for a more dense understanding of the cinematic sensorium.<sup>10</sup>

**R**egularity may be as important as transformation in understanding film experience. How does the cinema as experience and vehicle of narrative construction play itself out on an everyday basis? Here it can be understood not only as a medium of unrelieved disequilibrium, but as something experienced repeatedly, regularly, even predictably. We should not underestimate the significance of the cinema as a form of regular, normalized public congregation, sometimes assuming great symbolic functions: the re-opening of the cinema in Sarajevo was indication of a will to public congregation and a shared culture in the genocidal context of the former Yugoslavia.

However, away from such heightened symbolic functions for normalization, let us consider the cinema as a more matter of fact everyday space: composed of the hall, its internal organization of foyer, auditorium, seating and the projected film, and its public presence, as in its façade, advertisements, marquees, hoardings. And let us see this space in relation to

a broader space, in the market, near factories, schools, office blocks, in a mall, in residential areas; and how it is located in the depth of this space or on its margins, near main arterial thoroughfares, linking one space to another through transportation.

Let us argue then that the experience inside the hall, and of what is projected onto the screen, is distinctive, for you can't experience it elsewhere, or through any other medium. But let us also suggest that this experience is also *continuous* with the space in which it is located.

**L**ooking at cinema in this framework, as a cultural experience of space, there are instances when foundational cultural issues have been involved. For example Brian Larkin has shown how in the Nigerian city of Kano, Islamic authority had a significant influence on the public discourses and urban practices relating to the cinema. Islamic clergy and public opinion was strongly ranged against the cinema as a colonial imposition, as something which hit at the tenets of Islamic moral and social prohibitions and, perhaps, around the very representation of the human image.

Larkin draws out a significant distinction between the Islamic city and spaces beyond it, where new migrants to the city, as well as young people under Islamic tutelage, flocked to the cinema on a regular basis.<sup>11</sup> A famous instance of such a cultural blockade of the cinema emerges with the Iranian revolution, when a large number of cinema theatres, again seen as cultural impositions, were burnt down, substantially affecting the film exhibition trade for a long time after. The paradox is that some of the revolution's governmental elites, as well

as filmmakers such as Mohsen Makhmalbaf who strongly identified with the revolution, have generated some of the most interesting and critically minded of world cinema in the most fraught political circumstances.

A spatial politics of culture has been more widely evident. In the colonial Indian context, this has been related to the opposition between the 'native town' and the cosmopolitan colonial sectors of the city. Kathy Hansen has traced how this operated in Bombay for the theatre,<sup>12</sup> and Stephen Hughes has looked at the division of exhibition practices between these sectors.

Interestingly, such a division does not automatically imply one between indigenous genres and foreign cinema, as one might expect. Hughes has shown how the cinemas of Georgetown in early 20th century Madras were in fact devoted, not to the mythological films that were the earliest Indian film genres, but to the international action serial. The film trade saw this as emerging from the preference of predominantly working class audiences for such kinetic, visceral fare.<sup>13</sup>

**I**ssues of class and social differentiation are crucial to the interrogation of the cinema's public space. This is indicated by recent research into the history of Delhi's exhibition practices and imagined cinema audiences. According to Kirit Desai, the owner of the Moti cinema off Chandni Chowk, a really substantial audience for the cinema only came about after the Second World War, and especially after

8. Anna Friedberg, *Window Shopping: Cinema and the Postmodern*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1993.

9. Linda Williams, 'Discipline and Fun: Psycho and Postmodern Cinema', in Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams edited, *Reinventing Film Studies*, Edward Arnold, London, 2000.

10. Ranjani Mazumdar is currently undertaking a research project on these linkages for the contemporary Bombay cinema.

11. Brian Larkin, Cinema Theatres and Moral Space in Northern Nigeria, *ISIM Newsletter* 3, July 1999, 13.

12. Kathryn Hansen, 'Parsi Theatre and the City: Locations, Patrons, Audiences', *Sarai Reader 02, The Cities of Everyday Life*, Delhi, 2002.

13. Stephen P. Hughes, 'The pre-Phalke Era in South India: Reflections on the Formation of Film Audiences in Madras', *South Indian Studies*, no. 2, July-December 1996.

the Partition, where there was a major exchange of populations. Before Partition, Shahjanabad had a ratio of over 40% Muslims; after, the number dwindled to the national average of 10%.

Cinemas such as Moti and Jagat would show the quality Hindi films of the time, from the work of Prabhat Talkies, Bombay Talkies, New Theatres, and then moving to films by the reputed filmmakers of the 1950s such as Raj Kapoor, Bimal Roy, Mehboob and Guru Dutt. However, as Bhargupati Singh's research has shown, while the exhibition patterns in the two halls might have been similar, audiences seem to have been rather different. Moti was considered much more upmarket and attracted a socially complex audience. This is indicated in the hall's exhibition of English films in morning shows. These were not necessarily action films, and their exhibition carried on until the mid-1970s. Jagat, on the other hand, close to the fish market and chicken markets, was seen as catering to poorer sectors of the old city.<sup>14</sup>

In addition to the largely commercial profile that the area is known for today, with its burgeoning wholesale and retail trade in spices, cloth, dry fruit, jewellery and electronic goods, there was a strongly residential profile to the city at the time. A number of film trade people stayed nearby, in the elite neighbourhood of Rajpur Road in the civil lines. In these early times, the trade relied on local audiences to fill its halls. Subsequent accounts of decline place emphasis on the depletion of the neighbourhood's well-to-do local residents. When Kirit Desai reflects on how and when circum-

stances changed, he suggests that, somewhere in the 1970s, he notices a downturn.

**B**etter-off residents had shifted elsewhere, and the old city cinemas were no longer attracting families and women audiences, always considered crucial to the cinema's social legitimacy. Desai suggests that the change in the nature of markets also altered audiences in the area. It was around this time that the electronic goods markets emerged, and people used to come from far and wide to buy components and merchandise which they would be retailing elsewhere. This provided what Kirit calls a 'floating population'. Perhaps we have an image here of the mobile 'bachelor' population, in the city for short stays, a restless, transient population hustling for goods and attracted to a cinema of sensation and distraction.

Plebeian audiences were also considered important, those involved in hard labour and variable hours in small repair shops, workshops and garages, in daily labour and the plying of rickshaws. Research at the Robin cinema, near the former Sabzi Mandi area, indicates a similar profile. A decisive moment for the hall was the shifting of the Sabzi Mandi to Azadpur, and the closure of nearby mills. A more middle class audience from the vicinity chose to visit the newer Amba cinema. Like other struggling halls of the old city, Robin does not have the financial capacity, or the anticipated returns, to seek new film releases, and screens older films with action stars such as Mithun Chakravarty and Sunny Deol and the popular comic star Govinda as its staple attractions.

In general, given the changed audience profile for the old city, the substantial investments needed to bring in new sound and projection

equipment did not seem worth it. A more socially complex audience, especially young people wanting to see English films, was also assailed when trade with the US industry broke down, suddenly removing the quality Hollywood film from the market.

**S**hortly after, in the early 1980s, thanks to relaxation of import regulations, the morning show supplied by the independent importer of sleazy, or at least sleazily marketed, foreign films came into its own. (Over time, the films marketed in this way include art films such as Goretta's *The Lacemaker*, Imamura's *The Ballad of Narayama*, and Peter Greenaway's *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover*). In this account, from an estimable cultural pastime, the cinema of the old city had started to assume its current image of catering to a viscerally driven audience eager for immediate gratification.

People from the film trade recall that back in the 1950s there was hardly any activity in Connaught Place after seven o'clock in the evening. People would come by tonga from the old city to see movies at Regal, Odeon and Rivoli. Like some other halls of the old city, Regal, taken over by the Dayal family in 1938, was a hybrid exhibition space, featuring live theatrical shows along with movies. Its architectural design, featuring boxes, wings and green rooms indicates this earlier history.

In the account of the cinema's current owner, Suddheshwar Dayal, there is a clear idea of the type of cultural capital the cinema was associated with. This included performances by the dance and drama troupes of Uday Shankar and Prithviraj Kapoor, visits by Viceroy's and independent India's new political elites, and exhibition of the reputed directors of the 1950s. This profile carried on down to the films of the parallel cinema of

14. Bhargupati Singh, 'Aadamkhor Haseena (The Man Eating Beauty) and the Anthropology of a Moment', paper presented at City One, conference on the South Asian urban experience, Sarai-CSDS, 9-11 January 2003.



Benegal, Nihalani and Ray in the 1970s. By this time the hall had declined considerably.

**E**arlier, going to the Regal was evidently a culturally esteemed leisure time practice, associated with eating out at Devico's, now the Standard restaurant and, from the 1950s, at the Gaylord restaurant. CP with its broad arcades, roads and parking arrangements, provides a readymade space for a variety of consumer practices and leisure time pursuits – buying, browsing, strolling 'window shopping', and spectator pleasures. This is quite in contrast to the dense wholesale markets of the old city that mobilized a variety of transports, headload workers and rickshaws, a space cluttered with the co-presence of labour, trade and consumption.

These halls too gathered their audiences after Partition, when the western sector of the city started getting a new population. It was in the 1950s, that new cinema seems to have emerged to cater to these new populations and the urban growth of this period. Cinemas such as Liberty came up in Karol Bagh at this time. From now on, when we think of a cinema as being continuous with its space, we need to think more carefully about what constituted that space. Often, this means looking further afield than the locality.

Perhaps symptomatic of a more territorially mobile population was the emergence from the 1950s of what could be called 'cusp' or corridor cinemas. Dotted along various axes of transport – the Delite on Asaf Ali Road, Golcha in Daryaganj, Filmistan between old and new cities – these halls were positioned to seek audiences from beyond their locality. Significantly, each of these has been in a position, in the last couple of years, to invest in renovation.

Sometimes there could be a distinct disjunction between a hall and the space it is located in. A hall such as Shiela in Paharganj next to the New Delhi railway station would be a case in point. When V.V. Giri, the then President and former trade union leader was asked to write a note in a commemoration souvenir on the hall's tenth anniversary in 1971, he applauded the owners for providing cinema to a working class district. The cinema owners had a rather different understanding of the hall's location, seeing it as attracting audiences from the adjacent CP area rather than locally.

**I**n its first ten years, Shiela's most successful film was *My Fair Lady*, suggesting that it had successfully attracted CP's substantial English film consuming public. Its success was based on its presentation of itself as a vehicle of new cinematic technology, boasting the first 70 mm screen in the country, and inviting an important US architect, Ben Schlanger, to design its premises.

The southern and eastern swathes of the city got their cinema halls as populations started settling there from the end of the 1960s. An interesting early foray is the case of the Eros cinema, located in the refugee settlement of Jangpura. There are other instances of cinema allocations emerging in the wake of rehabilitation after Partition. The Alankar cinema plot, in the major refugee colony at Lajpat Nagar, was allotted by the Ministry of Rehabilitation at the end of the 1950s, although disputes amongst the allottees finally led to an auctioning of the plot to another party much later.

The Sood family, who run the Eros cinema, also invested towards the end of the 1960s in Rajouri Gardens, where they set up the Vishaal cinema. Clearly important players in

the city's real estate, they bought up a cinema plot at Green Park, and also own the Park Royale hotel. The real estate giant, Ansals, bought up the Green Park site and built Uphaar, venue for the catastrophic fire of 1997 that led to many deaths and dramatized the hazards of poorly maintained halls. In the map of urban planning after independence, Uphaar emerges on the basis of allocations for district and community centres. And these plans acquire substantial implementation towards the end of the 1960s.

Uphaar in the Green Park District Centre, Sapna in Kailash colony, Savitri in Greater Kailash, Anupam at the Saket district centre, Sangam in Moti Bagh, Chanakya at Yashwant Place – these are the typical halls of a period in which the state appeared to be working out a design and a space for a life of leisure, one not too far removed from the spaces of residence. Chanakya cinema, started in 1970, was leased by the Khanna family from the New Delhi Municipal Council. Interviews with the owner, Rajesh Khanna indicate that he imagined an elite audience for his hall, one which would drive to the theatre from various parts of south Delhi.

**E**ast Delhi halls came up during the same period; with the exception of Radhu Palace in Shakarpur, again apparently part of a district centre area, others start on a temporary basis. Swaran, near Jagatpuri, for example, started as a temporary theatre, and only subsequently got regularized. Others such as Gagan and Chand are clearly oriented to working class audiences. Like the cinemas of the old city, they invest little in the way of overheads and keep ticket prices low.

Within a decade, this second configuration of cinema and urban space – oriented to distinct middle class audiences in the south, to lower

middle class and worker populations in the east – rapidly tumbled into crisis. There are key developments involved here. First, the embargo on US imports in the mid 1970s almost immediately depleted the cinema of the mainstream English film, thereby undercutting a significant cultural strata for film going.

**S**ubsequently, the connotations of the English film shifted with the emergence of a c-circuit or soft porn film with the opening out of import policies to independent importers around 1984. Simultaneously, the cinema trade underwent its first major crisis with the proliferation of pirated video-cassettes during the period. This was also the period when a high incidence of bomb attacks linked to the Khalistan movement hit at public gatherings in cinemas and enclosed market spaces. From this point onwards, there has been a continuous sense of crisis within the trade down to the present time. Each advance in domestic leisure technologies and of regimes of copying and illicit distribution have functioned like sledge hammers on the fabric of the cinema as a public institution: from the advent of videos and colour television in the 1980s, to the importance of cable satellite relays from the early 1990s, and down to video CDs at the present time.

There were three types of response to this – at the levels of production, distribution and exhibition. A high-end cinema emerged, especially from about 1995, which looked as much, if not more, to foreign markets than local theatres. At the level of distribution, there were attempts to integrate the cable trade to film distribution practices by organizing shorter periods within which films would be distributed in theatres, to be followed by legitimate exhibition through sat-

ellite channels. In practice, there was considerable infringement of these agreements, and television rights were sold before the stipulated time, as theatrical returns often proved short-lived.

Finally, and perhaps most complexly for the experience of cinema, was the emergence of exhibition models of multiplex, Cineplex and 'miniplex'. Future projections in the trade signal a new drive to segment publics and create niche audiences for the markedly spatial experience of the multiplex, where the cinema is only one in a menu of leisure attractions. However, whether this will remain on the model of the elite Anupam complex is open to question. The Priya Village Roadshow company's efforts to extend this model, for example to Naraina, with a strongly working class profile, has been unsuccessful. Further, many theatres in Delhi are now lobbying for changes in land allocations, with the hope of reducing theatre space hugely, and letting out the remainder of the space for commercial exploitation. This bid to convert the cinema theatre is widespread across the city, suggesting that the cinema is unlikely to retain the elite niche profile of the first multiplexes.

**B**ut cinema is also a content that can be manoeuvred; along with music, into formats that fuel the media efflorescence in unregulated markets and everyday practices. In this transformation of film publics and practices, are we witness to the other side of the creation of an elite niche public, as new technologies of reproduction ensure a distribution of film and music beyond branded merchandise and the portals of the plush multiplex? The bazaar becomes a crucial locus for such transactions. Popular media practices have transformed a Lajpat Rai Market or a Palika Bazaar from substantial

clothing markets into sellers of electronic goods.

**M**apping a space like Palika is like conjuring with a layered sense of the history of Connaught Place and its environs. The market emerged in the wake of the destruction of the Coffee House, perceived as a venue for discussion and dissent under the Emergency of 1975-77, and shopkeepers along the Panchkuar road were shifted here. The market condenses a fairly rapid patterning of rise and decline in the history of commodities. An unregulated electronic commodity trade puts older trades in clothes, jewelry and handicrafts into the shade, only to careen into a new cycle of crisis engendered by the availability of cheap portable equipment for digital reproduction.

If there is a distinctive dimension to this new context for contemporary film experience, it lies in this sense of a dispersal which cannot be regulated. Technologies such as the cheap CD writer and MP3 compression undermine centralized locations for reproduction and distribution. New locations emerge, both for reproduction and, indeed, re-assembly, as CDs are customized for the individual consumer of popular music. Portability and cheapness ensure that equipment can be quickly shifted away from the intrusive eye of the detective agency hired to monitor copyright infringements.

A cottage industry defined by low capital investment and ad hoc locations presents often insurmountable posers to the official industry. Instead of the big market, we have the image here of a congeries of localities and, in these dispersed fields, intimations of a reinvention of marginalized selves. Local ethnographies have shown how socially marginal neighbourhoods are transformed by access to new media technologies.

There are countervailing pictures of the mediatized city as it is experienced in the locality. The history of the cable trade suggests both the dynamics of reinvention, as figures move amongst trades such as scrap dealing, groceries and cable operation, but also of containment. Here the big corporate players appear to have successfully combined with local operators in a bid to restrict flexibility and autonomy, both of the trade at large and of the consumer.

**T**here are indications here of substantial deals amongst the corporates as they whittle down small players who disrupt their design for territorial division, the enumeration of subscribers, and maximizing of profits. While a burgeoning legislative regime has not as yet proved effective in its monitoring of copyright infringement in dispersed markets, cable legislation and corporate negotiations seem to have provided another, more forceful regime of regulation of the trade and of access by the household.

Tracking the history of film in the city intersects with other city itineraries. The media history of Delhi's localities is defined by mobilities of trade and of consumption, histories of uprootment and resettlement, and is part of a wider history of technological transformations, legislative and administrative regulation, and social and political history. After Partition, refugees arrive and camp in front of the Lal Qila, inaugurating rehabilitation policies that provide the genesis of the Lajpat Rai market. Across the river, the Swaran cinema is associated with a terrifying moment in the history of the city, as most members of the Sikh family who run the hall are victims of a murderous mob in the anti Sikh riots of 1984. Cinemas are torn down and cable networks relayed as the metro carves a path for itself

through Delhi today. Here, a violent history of the city intersects with the history of the cinema.

**M**ore specifically, cinema history provides us with stories of audience congregation and dispersal, urban regulation and tactical manoeuvre, the reinvention of technological formats and social selves. The spatial coordinates of the cinema move through a series of registers. The cinema is defined by local spaces, with their own logic of social distinction; it has more fluid linkages to audience congregation as the city, its transport networks and forms of mobility undergo change; and it develops in an interactive relationship to market and consumer practices, ranging from the bazaar through to the mall. Finally, and most complexly, the film is defined by networks, of distribution and exhibition, and those arising from the contemporary deployment of technological formats for copying, distribution and delivery.

An engagement with the space of the cinema does not resolve the problems we had started out with: how to reconcile a social history with a history of film interpretation and cinema experience. Nevertheless, it provides a significant entry point for researching the question of experience, posing as it does the linkages between the cinema, the rhythms of everyday life and the experience of space. There are indications here that the particular dispositions of energy, attention and distraction, the key features of tactility and of perception, may be crucially organized in the relations between the sequestered spaces of the cinema and those outside. This does not wish away what actually unravels on the screen, and what sense people make of films. It merely returns viewing experience to its location, and asks us to look at that context itself as a venue for cultural practice and meaning making.

# Pride of place

STEPHEN P. HUGHES

FILM exhibition is without doubt one of the most under-studied, under-theorized and unappreciated areas in the study of cinema in India.<sup>1</sup> While scholarship on Indian film has celebrated big name stars, the classic and blockbuster films, leading directors and the lore of production, the importance of exhibition has generally been neglected. Of course, histories of Indian cinema routinely give honourable mention to the chronology of exhibition 'firsts' and the pioneer exhibitors who promoted them.<sup>2</sup> However, there have as yet been no sustained attempts to study exhibition as a pivotal institution within the history of cinema in India. It is not that exhibition is just a missing piece in the history of cinema in India that can be

added on to provide balance to conventional accounts. Rather, once exhibition is taken as a necessary part of film history, we must rethink how we construct Indian cinema as an object of study.

In the first sections of the essay, I argue that the issue of exhibition will help us to reconceive two overlapping sets of relationships: (i) between film texts and their performance and (ii) between spectatorship and audiences. In the second half of the essay, I evaluate some of the implications for how the study of exhibition will alter the research agenda for the study of Indian cinema.

This essay uses the topic of exhibition to pose a series of questions for film studies and film history in India. In speaking of film 'exhibition', I refer to a set of institutional practices for the public presentation of and encounter with film screenings. At their most basic, these institutional practices include (i) the organization and maintenance of physical space to accommodate audiences and the projection of films; (ii) the sale of tickets,

1. Throughout this essay I will use the terms 'film studies' and 'film history' interchangeably. For my purposes the two terms always mutually imply each other.

2. All the standard overviews on Indian cinema start with the obligatory reference to the first exhibition in 1896. For example, Erik Barnouw and S. Krishnaswamy (1980), Firoze Rangoonwalla (1975, p. 9), or most recently, Yves Thoraval, (2000, p. 1-4).

admission procedures and crowd control; (iii) the selection and rental of film programmes; and (iv) the business of managing, marketing and advertising. My basic question is: why does exhibition matter to the study of Indian film history? In addressing this question I offer a series of related points to suggest some of the major consequences and challenges that exhibition presents for the study of cinema in India.

**E**xhibition articulates film texts and their performance: The example of exhibition forces us to rethink the centrality of the film texts for the study of cinema. A study of cinema that takes exhibition into account must consider film texts themselves as a kind of performance—a unique interaction of people and projected media at a specific place and occasion. The reconception of cinema as performance has important consequences for how one constructs the object of film studies and how we can relate film texts to historical practice.

One of the basic assumptions of film studies is the apparently tautological notion that it is the study of films. That is, studies of film tend to assume that films present an unambiguous, uniquely differentiated and enduring object of study. Certainly the dominant approaches to the study of cinema in India over the last several decades have mobilized the metaphor of text in constituting film as an object of analysis. However, the general emphasis on internal 'textual operations' and 'narrative structures' have made it difficult for the study of cinema in India in getting beyond the films themselves. Even when scholars argued that Indian films must be understood in relation to their social contexts and cultural traditions, the substance of their arguments concerning the articulation of society and cinema usually

came down to an analysis of 'narrative structures' (Chakravarty 1989 and 1993) or reduced to a 'reading' of specific film texts (Nandy 1998).

No matter how well one tries to read between the lines, the social existence of a film cannot be read solely from film texts. Even when film studies scholarship employs the broader category of the cinema as 'institution' or deals with the larger issues of film stars, genres, modernity, nationalism or politics, the basic units of analysis are films themselves. This raises the problem of how to enable the study of film (defined as textuality) to consider its relationship to larger social and historical settings (Vasudevan 1995; Klinger 1997). The study of exhibition offers a partial solution to this problem.

**O**nce films are considered from the perspective of exhibition we can no longer assume that the film text alone can provide the transcendental horizon for the study of cinema. The study of exhibition renders films as performative social events with multiple histories. This means that seen from the perspective of exhibition, films cannot be studied as finished and timeless objects. Instead, one must be attentive to how films are constantly rearticulated through the specific historical situations of public exhibition and reciprocally constructed through a complex social interchange with audiences. This decentres the abstract objectivist conception of film as codes, narratives and language, and reconceives films as constantly being reiterated, remade and contested as ongoing social events within each act of exhibition.<sup>3</sup>

With exhibition in mind one must, at the very least, ask and differ-

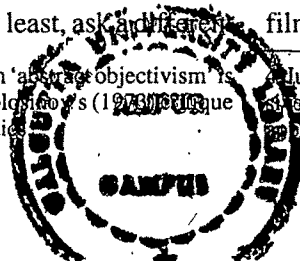
set of questions about how films are screened at different times and places, for different audiences and social settings. The question becomes: how are films continually rearticulated within specific historical conjuncture of their multiple screenings? This is not to argue that we can ignore film texts, but that we need to consider them as they are continually rearticulated within the contexts of their exhibition. Any consideration of films' meaning cannot exclude in principle and in advance its living, dynamic and reciprocal relationships with its viewers.

**C**ollapsing the distinction between ideal spectators and actual audiences: One of the major challenges yet to be addressed in film studies and film history in India is to link the theoretical conception of spectators to a more empirically-informed understanding of audience histories. Within film theory, spectatorship is a theoretical concept used to consider how film viewers are constituted and positioned by the textual and representational aspects of films.<sup>4</sup> Theories of spectatorship have been explicitly constituted in opposition to the notion of audience which refers to the empirical, historical and sociological understanding of those who actually attend the cinema. The study of film exhibition offers an important and necessary way to help reformulate the relationship between spectatorship and audiences.

The relationship between Indian cinema and its viewers has been primarily theorized from the perspective of the films themselves. Since the 1990s there has been a general shift in the scholarship on Indian film away from a strictly formalist approach to film texts toward issues of spectator-

3. My use of the term 'abstract objectivism' is drawn from V.N. Volgin's (1973) critique of structural linguistics.

Judith Mayne (1993) provides a comprehensive review of film studies scholarship and has approached the questions of spectatorship.



ship. For example, Vasudevan has argued that Bombay cinema of the 1940s and 1950s textually constructed the subjectivity of the spectator by inviting him/her to assume an identity defined along an axis of gender, class and nationhood (1995). Likewise Rajadhyaksha (1994) has analyzed Indian silent cinema according to how its modes of address constructed the gaze of its spectators.

One cannot dispute that films position and construct certain ways spectators are able to view films, but it does not follow that films determine the totality of their viewers' responses. However, the problem is that when the study of film is defined as a kind of textual determinism, the spectator cannot be anything other than a theoretical abstraction, idealized and homogenized as a logical subject produced by the film itself. Once spectatorship is reduced to being a function of textual analysis, the empirical and historical questions of who, where, why or how Indian audiences might have engaged with the cinema become impossible.

Issues of spectatorship can be reoriented around film exhibition such that the *object* of viewing can be understood in relation to the *context* of viewing. (Morley 1992, pp. 157-158). If a film's mode of address helps constitute spectators, so too the institution, practices and spaces of exhibition help shape the audience's experience of films. Especially before TV, video, VCD and DVD, cinema theatres and the practices of film exhibition were the primary means around which the sensual and social experience of the cinema in India revolved. Throughout most of the 20th century, exhibition provided the necessary material, sensual, spatial and institutional conditions for Indian audiences to engage with the cinema. Everything

from cinema architecture, decorations, the organization of the compound, ventilation and seating arrangements helped to construct the physical and spatial sense of film viewing.

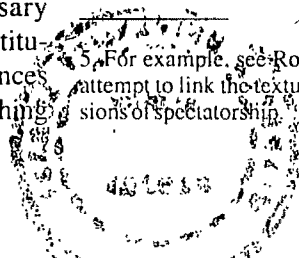
One can also look to the staging of films, music, narration, live entertainments, intervals and advertising as all helping to frame the experience of films. Even the practices of vending and consuming refreshments and snacks, tobacco, paan, soda and sometimes alcohol and toddy were important as part of how audiences experienced films. Further, the social atmosphere within cinema theatres, made up of noise, talking, intimacies, disruptions and pranks, significantly helped to shape a shared sense of films. Within the context of exhibition, the study of how films address their spectators needs to coincide with how audiences are constituted through the social architecture and phenomenology of film going.<sup>5</sup>

Exhibition situates the cinema as part of local histories: Much of Indian film studies in the 1990s has been preoccupied with questions about the nation. Generally speaking, recent scholarship on Indian film has tended to collapse the history of the cinema as part of the larger narratives of the nation and its modernities. Of course, one cannot deny that the issues of nation and nationalism are important for Indian film studies. However, these nationalist preoccupations have had the unintended consequence of marginalizing and subsuming other alternative histories of the cinema in India. The study of exhibition necessarily helps to refocus our attention down to the local settings where audiences engage with the cinema.

For the study of exhibition, film studies must be more attentive to situating the cinema in relation to local histories, both urban and provincial. On the one hand, the small-scale study of local histories of cinema are necessary for better understanding the articulation of film and nation. On the other, these local histories may not necessarily correspond neatly with, and may even productively disrupt, the all-India metanarratives of nation.

In my own research, I have tried to study the place of cinema theatres within the urban geography and colonial order of the city formally known as Madras. Using examples from the early 20th century, I have looked at how the location of cinema halls within specific neighborhood settings, the selection of film programmes and the organization of cinema hall spaces helped define the social and cultural geography of the city. The history of exhibition can be read as a crucial articulation where the cinema is mapped out on the urban space of Madras (Hughes 1996). Recently, other scholars have also worked on the relationship between exhibition and urban histories of India (S.V. Srinivas 2000; Grimaud 2002). In particular, Bhri Gupta Singh in conjunction with SARAI-CSDS research project, 'Publics and Practices in the History of the Present' is currently producing important research on local histories of the cinema in Delhi.

Despite these initial efforts, much research remains to be done on the urban histories of exhibition. Nevertheless, there are also other local histories to attend to. We usually assume that the growth of cinema in India over the 20th century was predominantly an urban phenomenon. However, it is clear from my own research in trying to piece together the expansion and geographical spread



5. For example, see Robert Arnold's (1990) attempt to link the textual and spatial dimensions of spectatorship.

of exhibition in south India that the vast majority of cinema theatres over the course of the 20th century were provincial. If those in film studies choose to follow the history of exhibition, I am certain that it will lead them away from the main metropolitan areas into district cities, smaller market towns and rural hinterlands. These places are not currently on any maps of Indian film history and represent an important new research agenda for the field.

Research into the history of film exhibition that pays attention to where cinema theatres were sited and of whom their local constituencies consisted will also offer important new information on the growth and composition of cinema audiences. The history of cinema in India has been largely written without reference to anyone who might have watched films. Beyond vague generalizations about the masses and unfounded assertions about 'the film-going public', we know little about the historical composition of film audiences in India. Through careful documenting local histories of exhibition we will for the first time be able to begin to address the questions of who saw what kinds of film, where and when.<sup>6</sup> Details such as ticket classes, admission prices, promotional activities, public transport, local population, employment and residential patterns are all relevant for investigating who attended the cinema.

**M**ethodological challenges for the study of exhibition: Any social and cultural history of the cinema is impossible without reliably knowing how, when, where and to whom exhibition made access to films possible. However, the basic facts of exhibi-

tion history in India have largely gone undocumented and much of what there is has not been based on solid research and merely perpetuates misinformation on the subject. Before we can begin to evaluate how the study of exhibition might help us to rethink our understanding of the history of film in India, we must first start by seriously questioning what has already been published on the topic.

**M**y own research has exposed some of the difficulties in knowing what to believe about the history of exhibition in India. Take for example, the case of the first purpose built cinema theatre in Madras. In his ground breaking book, *The Message Bearers*, Baskaran (1981) claimed Major Warwick established the Electric Theatre during 1900 as the first cinema theatre in Madras.<sup>7</sup> Ever since, the details of this account have been universally accepted as an established fact and reproduced by many authors as being authoritative (e.g., Chabria 1994; Baskaran 1996; Rajadhyaksha and Willemen 1999; Thoraval 2000). As it turns out Baskaran made an honest mistake. The Electric Theatre was established in 1913 and the proprietor's name was not Major Warwick but Warwick Major.<sup>8</sup>

The problem here is not with Baskaran's scholarship which despite

7. As the source for this claim, Baskaran cited a passage from the *Indian Cinematograph Committee Evidence, 1827-1928* (vol. 3). This passage apparently corresponds to the oral testimony of Thomas H. Hufston (sole proprietor, The Peninsula Film Service), but I never managed to find any mention of the Electric Theatre therein.

8. For a review of the theatre's opening performance, see *Madras Times*, 28 July 1913. The Electric Theatre only ran for two years before being shut down when the government took over the building in order to build a new main post office on Mount Road in early 1915. For information on recent restoration work, see, T. Ramakrishnan, 'Electric Theatre gets a New Lease of Life,' *The Hindu*, 3 November 1997.

this error is nonetheless based on careful and solid research. Rather, the problem is more generalizable to the way that Indian film history has been built upon predigested materials and ready-made narratives. What started as an honest mistake was picked up by Chabria (1994) and further elaborated by a new and much larger claim that the Electric Theatre was India's first permanent cinema hall. After this publication, the erroneous 1900 date for the Electric Theatre was further authorized, this time without citation, by the *Encyclopedia of Indian Cinema* (Rajadhyaksha and Willemen 1999). To make matters worse the Government of India has commemorated the Electric Theatre (est. 1900[sic]) with the special postage stamp as part of the 100-year anniversary of cinema in India.

**Y**ou might ask, what difference does this 13-year discrepancy in dates make? In the first instance, the revised date of 1913 requires us to rethink completely the early history of cinema in Madras.<sup>9</sup> However, this example is more generally indicative of the historiography of Indian cinema. Most of what passes for the history of cinema in India has been recycled from earlier accounts without critical engagement or attempting to do any original research. The study of exhibition is a necessary part of a thorough-going and critical interrogation of the historiography of cinema in India.

Exhibition as an object of study also presents specific methodological problems for film history. The study of film exhibition is necessarily a dispersed activity that involves historically particular, heterogeneous, contingent, widely scattered and fleeting practices and people. In terms of

6. For more on the importance of exhibition as part of cinema audience history, see Robert Allen (1990).

9. For a more detailed discussion of the early history of cinema exhibition in south India, see Hughes (1996).



theory, exhibition defies the kind of abstract generalizations that are common to approaches to the study of cinema based upon psychoanalytic and semiotic film theory. Instead, exhibition histories tell specific stories about local people, institutions, events and communities that can never be theorized in advance of research.

In terms of research practice, the study of exhibition is very different from analyzing a film and requires more than the armchair approach common to many versions of film studies. Exhibition helps to undermine the older presupposition that one can study the film as a definitive textual object, and that, after having been viewed and studied, the film can provide the basis upon which one can make a set of authoritative claims about how to interpret it. In this regard, the study of exhibition continues the recent trend in scholarship on Indian cinema in pursuing a wider range of archival, oral and ethnographic research at cinema theatres.<sup>10</sup>

**W**hen compared to the possibilities of textually analyzing early Indian films, which for the most part no longer exist or are difficult to obtain access to, historical research on exhibition is potentially spoilt for choice. Newspapers, city directories, government documents and reports, legal records, court documents, oral history and interviews are all relatively available and can be put to much better use for rewriting and challenging Indian film history than is currently the case. Perhaps the most urgent research needed at present is at cinema theatres themselves. The history of film exhibition, languishing at the moment in every city and town of India, is just

waiting to be investigated. In Chennai some of the oldest (dating back to the first decades of the 20th century) cinema theatres – the Gaiety, the Crown, Select, Murugan Talkies and Minerva – are all still in operation, but one suspects that they may not last much longer.

The enormity of film exhibition in India requires a collaborative effort. No one scholar could ever hope to do more than work on small fragments of history of exhibition. It is my hope that others will take up the call to research exhibition as part of the study of cinema in India. I am certain that through a collective effort on this topic we will be able to radically alter our understanding of Indian cinema.

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32 10. For an example of this range of historical sources, see Hughes (2000). Also, see Ravi Vasudevan's (2000) overview of recent research strategies on Indian cinema.



# The Bombay film poster

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THE film poster created for the popularization and marketing of the moving image has enjoyed a unique history ever since the birth of the cinema. Like the cinema, the poster has also gone through radical transformations linked to new technology and the proliferation of visual culture in the 20th century. In India, like in most parts of the world, film posters have historically formed an integral part of the distribution and circulation of films. These posters are supposed to provide the viewer with a basic sense of the narrative through a frozen image whose form is derived from different traditions of popular, traditional and modernist art cultures.<sup>1</sup>

To explore the status of the film poster in contemporary India, I will try to adopt a biographical method, however sketchy. Biographical details like where and how and for whom is the poster produced, its relationship to technology, how it travels, who designs them, its life span, its typical cultural markers, how its value changes over time and who owns the object. All these questions will inevitably take us into a complex maze of cultural, aesthetic and social values that shape the way the poster functions as an object of art, an icon, a semiotic moment and a commodity.<sup>2</sup>

Commodities, as many have pointed out, are forms located within

complex patterns of desire, need and cultural transactions.<sup>3</sup> The film object and its spinoffs like posters and fan magazines travel a complex journey as a commodity form whose material culture is so embroiled in the dynamics of everyday life and culture that it requires a method of study free of disciplinary boundaries. As an emblematic instance of popular culture, the poster's entanglement within forms of experience, performance, fashion codes, urban spectacle and desire are clearly evident. But these are difficult to pin down unless we trace the poster's life as a journey that moves through the complicated routes of film production, distribution and circulation.

**I**t is for this reason that I have suggested a biographical approach which assumes some broad conceptual assumptions.<sup>4</sup> An object can have many biographies based on the desired focus of the narrative. And like every other biography there will be gaps and absences, particular thrusts and engagements. What is offered here is a preliminary engagement that is based on early research, a narrative with a particular focus on the poster's contemporary manifestations in the era of new visual technologies.

It is difficult to give an exact date for the origins of the film poster. Lithographic printing was introduced in India in the late 19th century and was used to first print religious imagery.<sup>5</sup> The first full length feature made in India, *Raja Harishchandra* (Dada Saheb Phalke: 1913) was a mythological. Newspaper advertisements, handbills and publicity booklets of the film can be traced, but no references to the use of posters have been found.

The poster of the film *Kalyan Khajina* (Baburao Painter: 1924) is perhaps one of the earliest to have survived.<sup>6</sup> It was designed and painted by the director Baburao Painter himself.

Posters were usually hand painted on canvas and then used as the design source for printing on cheap paper. Since print publicity was the most important form of publicity, booklets of film songs and stories, handbills and posters flourished in the studio era with the poster becoming the most significant and dominant form.<sup>7</sup>

**H**istorically the poster has been important as a travelling form that moves from city walls to lavatories, from *pan* shops to huts. Used as a decorative form in *dhabas* and small hotels as well as to promote film culture, the poster is both an advertisement as well as a cultural icon. Posters have circulated within urban centres for many years. Their presence outside cinema theatres and on city walls has been a prominent visual aspect of most cities of the country.

In many parts of small town India, posters are pasted on to covered rickshaws with a man making announcements over the loudspeaker. In the big cities, the older forms of film promotion are slowly undergoing changes with the arrival of new digital technologies and the powerful presence of neon light advertisements in the streets. Unable to compete with the glittering lights of the new city, film posters seem to have moved away from the centre to the periphery. In Delhi for instance, posters are displayed primarily in the old city or in the dilapidated cinema halls of the eastern and western parts.<sup>8</sup> In small town India or what film distributors refer to as the 'interiors', posters continue to be plastered on walls.

The poster has always existed as a form that relies on distracted reception as people view them during their travels within the city. It has constituted itself as a form of 'street art' articulating a series of signs and symbols devised to arouse the curiosity

of the passer by. The urban landscape is a giant exhibition site within which the poster exists as one of the many elements that make up the semiotics of the city. As an iconic image, the poster is organized through a complex network of meanings which are produced, reproduced, contested and negotiated from within the dynamic flux and flow of everyday life.

Unlike calendar art which is also a mass printed form, the poster does not immediately have a buyer.<sup>9</sup> Because of its direct relationship to film publicity, the narrative composition of the poster is linked to practices of film production and distribution and like the form of popular cinema, the poster's semiotic value is created both internally and externally as it negotiates the industrial values of genre and stardom, audience expectation and desires.

**A** combination of image and text, the poster is created through a complex ordering of various elements that are based on an assumed hierarchy of information. For the designer, this hierarchy would be in the order of star/story/title and production credits. The textual material usually includes the name of the producer, director, script-writer, music director and lyricist. Stars and genres are two of the primary modes of meaning and pleasure offered by the film poster.<sup>10</sup> Genre implies a set of stylistic devices that can identify a set of films from another. The term 'genre films' is now commonly used to classify films from Hollywood which bring together a series of familiar stories through a combination of repetitive and familiar codes, narrative structure and plots. Genre is also about the different ways in which producers, audiences, distributors and critics create, organize and interpret a system of visual signs.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, the film poster's production and circula-

tion relies on a series of accepted codes that emerge out of the social and cultural life of both films and their posters.<sup>12</sup>

In India, posters negotiate the-  
matics of melodramatic conflict and  
action, romance and the family. Gene-  
ric elements are compositionally  
arranged to reflect the multi-genre look  
of popular Bombay cinema. Simrat  
Brar, a well-known poster designer in  
the industry, today recognizes that the  
film poster needs to cater to some  
forms of categorization. Most films  
have four to five different posters,  
each negotiating a different thematic  
of the film. For *Lagaan* (Ashutosh  
Gowariker: 2001), Brar created three  
versions based on the different the-  
matic elements of the film.

**T**he first poster foregrounded the tri-  
angle love story. Therefore Elizabeth  
(the Englishwoman) was profiled  
with Gracy Singh with Khan placed  
centrally within the frame. The second  
poster for *Lagaan* focused only on  
Amir Khan and Gracy Singh's ro-  
mance. The third version had a lineup  
of the village cricket team facing the  
camera. This was considered the most  
unusual. In retrospect, Brar recog-  
nizes that the cricket team poster was  
not really spectacular but stood out  
amidst the clutter of other posters.<sup>13</sup>  
Here the poster's difference lay in  
moving against the dominant generic  
codes of other film posters.

Similarly stars have always  
played an important role in the com-  
positional pattern of the poster. Mod-  
ern publicity methods require a high  
degree of familiarity between the star  
and his/her potential audience. Seve-  
ral scholars have written about the  
process that goes into the buildup of  
this familiarity which is worked out  
not just through the filmic image but  
also through a whole array of images  
generated by fan and gossip maga-

zines, radio, television newspapers  
and the film poster.<sup>14</sup>

**D**esigned to make the star familiar  
and endearing for a wide public, the  
star becomes the central governing  
reference point for film publicity. Our  
access to the stars are also created  
through photographic still images like  
production stills, celebrity photos,  
press handbooks, interviews, reviews  
and finally the film poster. All these  
images are generated during produc-  
tion and distribution and help to per-  
suade and prolong the power of the  
moving image both before and after  
the release of a film.

In the 1970s when Amitabh  
Bachchan was the reigning superstar  
of the Bombay film industry, the pos-  
ters often only used either his singular  
image or made him the dominant icon.  
*Deewar* (Yash Chopra: 1975) had  
several posters for its release. The story  
of two brothers, one a policeman, the  
other an outlaw was established  
clearly in the posters through costume,  
posture and demeanour. In one of the  
versions, Amitabh Bachchan was  
placed in the foreground standing in  
a defiant position looking directly at  
the spectator. Shashi Kapoor's face  
with his police inspector's cap was  
placed in the background. Bachchan's  
blue coloured dock worker shirt  
was recast as a red shirt in the poster.  
This was intended to make a connec-  
tion with the red colour that is worn  
by coolies at railway stations while at  
the same time present the superstar  
in a colour that was more visually  
striking than the royal blue he actually  
wore in the film.

*Coolie* (Manmohan Desai: 1981)  
has a poster that shows Bachchan in  
the centre of the frame, his red attire  
highlighted along with his badge  
number-786 (the numerical total that  
stands for *Bismillah-e-Rehemane  
Rahim*). Here the poster relies on pre-

existent knowledge available from  
his earlier films (*The number 786* was  
used in *Deewar*, the film that cata-  
pulted Bachchan to stardom). Thus  
stars are presented through techniques  
that create a larger than life image ena-  
bling forms of identification within a  
wide film public.

**S**tar discourses are also linked to  
cultures of fashion, beauty, sexuality  
and style. The look of the main stars  
is carefully orchestrated through a  
play with costumes, gestures, jewelry  
and expression. In *Hum Apke Hain  
Kaun* (Sooraj Barjatya: 1994), actress  
Madhuri Dixit's purple designer sari  
was displayed on almost all the pos-  
ters as a frozen pose taken from the  
well-known dance 'Didi Tera Dewar  
Deewana'. In the initial posters  
Madhuri's image was placed along-  
side that of Salman Khan. Subse-  
quently individual posters of just  
Madhuri were also brought out keep-  
ing in mind her popularity at the box  
office and the popularity of the pur-  
ple saree as a major fashionable wed-  
ding attire.

In the *Dilwale Dulhania Le  
Jayenge* (Aditya Chopra: 1995) poster,  
the traditional lehenga costume of the  
'Mehendi Lagake Rakhna' song was  
a major part of the poster but the for-  
eign locations and Kajol's mini skirt  
were also introduced quite carefully to  
highlight the actress' ability to present  
herself as both 'western' and 'Indian',  
'traditional' and 'modern'. Fashion  
designer Manish Malhotra's costume  
extravaganza for the film was cap-  
tured in the poster indicating the  
importance of fashion for stardom and  
the need to highlight both through a  
range of posters both before and dur-  
ing the running of a film.

In *Lagaan*, the producer and  
director wanted the poster to just have  
the village team placed centrally with  
the caption 'once upon a time in India'

written below the image. After much deliberation Simrat Brar, the designer for *Lagaan's* print publicity, placed Khan's face in a stylized form looking directly at the audience. So while the team was in the poster, Amir Khan's star power was also established to aid in the publicity.<sup>15</sup>

**T**he journey of the poster even after it departs from its original place of production is multilayered and enables us to make sense of both diverse audiences placed within particular geographical spaces, as well as the perceptions of distributors and producers who play with the desires of what they conceive to be the disparate audiences of India. Film posters are used primarily to advertise a film's initial release. However, as I have indicated, they are also reprinted with changes as the screening proceeds. In the reprints, the posters usually announce the successful run of a film or highlight those aspects which are seen to be popular with audiences.

Ramesh Sippy's *Sholay* released in 1975 had several posters released during the running of the film. Since *Sholay* was being promoted as a significant multistarrer film, the first poster had passport photo images of the entire cast placed in a line at the bottom with the wild brushstrokes of smouldering orange flames and the title occupying the rest of the frame. The first week was a difficult one for *Sholay*, creating a minor stir amongst the producers and distributors.<sup>16</sup> Subsequently another set of posters with Bachchan and Dharmendra prominently in the frame along with Amjad Khan (as Gabbar Singh) were printed.

A few weeks later, *Sholay* was declared a success at the box office and Gabbar Singh its most popular character. A new set of posters were made with Amjad Khan as the dominant icon of the poster, clearly indicat-

ing the film industry's perception that Gabbar's persona had been successful with audiences.<sup>17</sup> These changing perceptions that guide the final image of the poster become very important for any understanding of poster culture.

**F**ollowing design, around 1,50,000 posters are printed and then sent out to the various distribution territories across the country along with the film prints.<sup>18</sup> India has five major distribution territories with Bombay as the largest one. Given the scale of diversity and the vast interiors of the country, audiences are often segmented and fragmented according to what the distribution network sees as culturally and socially specific. Therefore, the A, B and C centres have come to represent three different streams of audience composition for the distributors.

A centres constitute the big metros like Delhi, Bombay, Calcutta, Bangalore, Chennai and other big cities. The B centres are the smaller towns, also known as the interiors and the C centres are the places where a special group of films, usually low budget semi-porn films, circulate. The compositional life of a film poster in India depends on the way the distributor works through these territorial divisions.

Sanjay Mehta, a leading distributor based in Delhi suggests that the 'urban cosmopolitan' sensibility of the A centres gives the distributor some freedom with the poster. The use of a guitar in a poster may not be acceptable in the interiors. Therefore, a new set of posters are usually designed locally to match the audience taste of the interiors. Mehta suggests that the guitar is then turned into a gun for the benefit of the B centre audiences.<sup>19</sup>

Similarly the popularity of particular stars in certain regions can change the look of a poster. A multi-

starrer film with actors like Sunny Deol and Saif Ali Khan would be organized to highlight Deol's masculine presence for the benefit of the North Indian territory and the interiors. The principles of star power according to regional sensibilities and audience expectation work to influence the design of the poster just as they play a role in star decisions for particular films. Action films are usually considered successful in the B centres and in some A centres. Here the posters highlight the melodramatic power of anger, the male body, guns, technology, cars and stunts. The figure of the woman is fairly marginalized here.

**T**he family films on the other hand, a big staple of the A centres, highlight the carnivalesque aspects of the new Indian family – joyous celebration, coy gestures, colourful wedding attire and the presence of many women. Romance plays a crucial role in the projection of the family films. For instance Yash Chopra's films which are usually successful with the A centres, are seen as a genre that articulates a 'soft, bubble gum, romantic look'.<sup>20</sup> Here clothing, pastel colours and a dreamlike fantasy disposition becomes important.

Most distributors and printers feel that posters coming from Bombay offer a generic form that attempts to create a universal appeal for a stratified and highly differentiated audience structure. While these posters remain very important, distributors feel it is imperative to address the tastes and preferences of their specific audience base. Local designs are therefore made to buttress the publicity mechanism for particular geographical territories.

In North India, the local designs use Hindi writing as opposed to English which is what Bombay sends out

today.<sup>21</sup> In Bengal the posters sometimes use Bengali titles. Popular religious festivals can also shape the look of the poster. In U.P. during Id, the local designs have 'Id Mubarak' written in bold right on top of the poster to cater to what they see as the 'Muslim belt'. Similarly, Diwali and Holi also play an important role in projecting particular films as festive offers for the holiday season.<sup>22</sup>

**A**round 70 to 80 thousand local posters are printed for a big budget film. Usually if a film does well in the first week, no new posters are created. However, if the first week goes badly, alternative designs are created to attract audience attention. As many printers and distributors have indicated, the clock starts ticking for them on the first Friday of a film's release. The fate of the film at the box office shapes the way the distributor makes 'judgements' about his audience. If the returns are low then elements that are seen as popular and acceptable get added to the local design of the poster, irrespective of their actual existence in the plot of the film.

The fate of Ashutosh Gowariker's first film *Baazi* (1995) at the box office offers us an interesting story. *Baazi* was a film whose intention was to reinvent Aamir Khan's romantic image into an action one. Aamir Khan plays the role of a police officer in the film. In one of the high points of the film, Aamir is shown dancing in drag (a disguise) on stage at one of the criminal owned nightclubs. This song had been repeatedly telecast on television much before the film's release and became extremely popular. When the film was actually ready for release, the first poster projected Aamir Khan in drag keeping in mind the popularity of the song with audiences.

Following the film's failure at the box office, Aamir Khan himself

blamed the producer for ruining the publicity. Instead of promoting the film as an action film, the actor felt the producer had used the dancing image incorrectly since it conveyed precious little about the film.<sup>23</sup> A new set of posters were subsequently brought out presenting Aamir Khan in different forms of action. Some showed Aamir's profile holding a gun, in others he looked directly at the audience, the gun in hand matched by an angry expression. The film could not recover its costs, but Khan's own perception regarding the publicity and the producer/distributor's attempt to change the look of the poster shows how star power, generic codes and audience acceptance constantly play themselves out in the constitution of the poster.

**T**he network of knowledge that circulates between the production and reception of the poster constitutes a zone of co-authorship between the public/audience and the mediated product. The circulating mythology of what works and is acceptable enters the language and parlance of the film industry's marketing strategy and gets assimilated as 'knowledge' of popular taste and the box office. While these perceptions obviously shape the actual production of films, its impact on poster culture is more dynamic. Once a film is released its fate is decided by the box office. Nothing can be done to change the film itself, steps can only be taken for future productions.

The poster as we have seen can be continuously reinvented and worked upon to help the film get its maximum profit at the box office. Therefore, the different versions of posters brought out during the running of a film, offer us a fleeting glimpse into the way distributors, audiences and stars negotiate the hidden terrain of desire, taste,

pleasure and expectation. The poster then does not simply exist as both use and exchange value. On the contrary its life clearly indicates how it is marked by cultural, social and cognitive processes that work to make it a particular kind of product.

**P**osters travel an elaborate journey moving through techniques of production, design composition, right from the colours used to the layout, and the final printing process. In the past photographs provided by the producer were creatively duplicated on canvas by painters. It took one week to design a hand-painted poster image which usually combined elements of action and stars, along with the credits. The artists were specialists in poster designing. The average canvas image was 30 inches wide and 40 inches in length. In the absence of enlargement lenses, the size had to be the same as the final poster print.

The canvas image was then photographed in natural sunlight using a traditional camera. The original design size was reduced after 1985 when new enlargement lenses arrived in India. This was followed by a period when the poster industry adopted what they popularly refer to as the 'cut and paste' method. Here photographic images of the film were cut out and compositionally arranged to create the final poster. The colour scheme for the background and other embellishments were added with the paint brush. The cut and paste has therefore been a combination of the photographic and the painted.

The poster industry itself is an elaborate structure today that requires about five to ten per cent of the overall budget of a film.<sup>24</sup> It is a crucial part of the print publicity packet designed for every film.<sup>25</sup> In all there are seven or eight major design houses, all located in Bombay.<sup>26</sup> Work is con-

tracted to these design houses who then prepare the print publicity package. The designers work through their ideas in consultation with the producer and the director. The designer is sometimes given the script and in the absence of one has to rely on the different ways in which the film is represented by its creators.

**T**he key issues that any designer would look for are songs, script, actors, locations and so on. The designer is also provided with many stills from the film. If these are not good enough, studio and outdoor photo shoots are organized with the lead star cast. All the photographs are then scanned. The process of selection takes days as the designer tries out different ways to layer and compose the posters with the available stills. The arrival of computer technology has made way for greater digital manipulation, forms of layering, colour corrections and multiple images. The ability to try out different compositions on the computer is seen as enabling greater flexibility to represent the multiple dynamics of any film.

Along with the breed of high profile established designers in Bombay, a parallel economy of local designers has emerged in other cities. These designers are comfortable with computer culture and regularly download star images from the internet to design local posters. The proliferation of computer shops of every kind has made accessibility to this technology easy. There are many former designers who are now sitting in computer shops, composing for election posters, low budget films (particularly *C* circuit and local designs for the interiors), government health campaigns and so on.<sup>27</sup> Despite their creative skills, none of the local designers get paid like their high profile counterparts in Bombay.

Given the chaotic nature of the film industry, almost all the decisions concerning the design composition are taken on an ad hoc basis. There is rarely a script for the designer to see. Simrat Brar who designed all the posters for *Lagaan* recalls that this was one of the rare projects for which she was given access to both the script and the songs which had already been shot. The theme of each film is usually broken-down into two or three central thematics. Brar saw *Dil Chahata Hai* (Farhan Akhtar: 2001) as a film that dealt with 'attitude, freshness and an international disposition.' Brar subsequently tried to establish the three themes together in different posters.<sup>28</sup>

**T**rained as a designer at the National Institute of Design, Ahmedabad, Brar started her career in advertising. While the Bombay film poster has always had its own unique form of presentation, Brar recognizes that today the look of the poster, its design aesthetics and paper quality is increasingly dependent on various trends within commercial advertising. Since many of the designers are now joining the film industry with a background in corporate advertising, the overlap of techniques is not surprising. The fluid movement between advertising and the film industry is also reflective of the new aesthetics of consumption emerging with globalization.

The link between consumption and the aestheticization of urban space has been explored by several scholars the world over. It is in the processes of circulation that the commodity form acquires magical properties. In India the visual power of globalization can be easily seen in the radical transformation of many parts of the city. The rise of multiplexes and refurbished movie theatres, the emergence of shopping malls, coffee shops, ATMs

and neon light advertisements across the prime districts of many of the big cities have introduced a different regime of spectacle.

**A**dded to this is the transformation of both the home and the outside where cable television has in a dynamic way changed the eye's optical capacity to wander through diverse locations of the world. The proliferation of visual 'surfaces' linked primarily to the spectacularization of consumerist display has transformed the nature of street interaction in some parts of the city, even as the coexistence with older forms of display continue to be present in other parts of the city.

Whatever the exact nature and extent of the transformation in India, there can be little dispute about the emergence of a distinctly different regime of visual culture where electronic surfaces and other forms of aestheticized display seem to have created a scopic fascination for visual euphoria. In the midst of the visual sensations that define the times that we are living through, like the cinematic form itself, the poster has also acquired that distinctly 'new' glossy look.

The coming of cable television in the 1990s created a new space for film publicity. Initially, song sequences were released for count down shows. Soon organized short trailers were created to publicize the film. The trailers have to make their presence felt in the clutter of programming, advertising and music. People from the world of advertising are now asked to make the trailers spectacular and dramatic. The trailers make sure that the audience is given an array of foreign locations, action, romance, music and star presence.

Having emerged as a prime site for film publicity, the relationship bet-

ween television and the film industry has deepened as virtually all the channels are now showcasing 'Bollywood'. Rahul Nanda, the man responsible for introducing digital technology in 1992, wiping out the 'cut and paste' method that was still prevalent at that time,<sup>29</sup> sees television as the main reason for the 'new look' of the poster. Nanda saw the big painted hoardings as 'kitsch', where 'actors looked dirty, painted and tacky.' He introduced the first digitally created billboards into the city.

**F**or Nanda, film advertising in the 1990s 'started looking classy and sophisticated.' Nanda faced initial resistance from traditional designers but computer technology finally became the dominant mode of poster designing. 'Today print media can look like electronic media,' says Nanda who sees the internet and global television as the markers of a new era where visual culture moves in a seamless loop between the print and the moving image.<sup>30</sup> Clearly the desire for gloss and sophistication is fuelled by a transformation of the visual scape that is visibly articulated in the arenas of architecture, advertising, film and fashion.<sup>31</sup> The site and street specific visual cultures of early modernity are being challenged today by 'the stasis of the fluid mobility granted to our perception by the technologies of television, the VCR, the World Wide Web, and virtual reality.'<sup>32</sup>

As the texture of the built environment undergoes changes through novel uses of steel, glass and light, we enter a zone of urban movement in certain parts of the city that is spectacularly aestheticized, magical and seductive. One of the major additions to the built environment that we have seen in the last few years is the entry and presence of television in public space. Television in its new incarna-

tion has also entered the dynamic rhythms of public life and space in seemingly unobtrusive ways. As coffee shops, restaurants, airports, department stores, bars, shops that are both small and big, fast food chains and other public spaces generate the visual culture of 'ambient television', the perceptual sphere of the distracted gaze experiences the visual dynamics of the electronic media.<sup>33</sup>

We encounter the television set in more places than just our home as it integrates itself within the rhythms of urban life. This pervasive and continuous interaction with the rapid movement of images, whether MTV or news, film songs or cricket, both at home and in public (in small towns and big cities) pushes the film poster to match the aesthetics and the shiny quality of the television screen while at the same time also appear in a more organized and ordered pattern.

Both Simrat Brar and Rahul Nanda have indicated how the look of the poster needs to overlap with the promos appearing on television. The visual appearance of both forms need to be similar in order to create a seamless engagement with the films publicity. The spectacularization of urban display requires a different order of aesthetics since as many have suggested, new technology has enacted ineradicable perceptual shifts on the spectacle. In this scenario, the hand painted cinematic image, once ordinary, now a lost art, acquires the status of a unique 'art' object.

**W**alter Benjamin, in his well-known theses on the destruction of aura after the birth of the photograph had envisioned a time when multiplication and mechanical reproduction would enable the possibility of art becoming a genuinely democratic form, accessible and available outside the rarified space of the art museum.<sup>34</sup>

In a strange twist, the original hand-painted film poster which was seen plastered on walls in various parts of the country and available for a price of five rupees in the streets till the early 1990s, has now acquired the status of an 'art' form as collectors enter the field of preservation, display and sale of the traditional poster.

This process can be seen as an instance of what Arjun Appadurai has described as commoditization by diversion where value is 'accelerated or enhanced by placing objects and things in unlikely contexts.'<sup>35</sup> The objects referred to here can be seen in the domain of fashion, domestic display and collecting. Appadurai suggests that this narrative of diversion rests on the commodities removal from its customary circuits through a coming together of the 'aesthetic impulse' and the 'entrepreneurial link'.<sup>36</sup>

**I**nitially overlooked as an art form because of its direct relationship to commercial networks of publicity, today the gradual disappearance of the traditional poster from the streets and public places where it had traditionally found a home, has made it a more respectable item to be studied, looked at and placed within the rarified atmosphere of galleries and homes. Just as the photographic, digitally created image becomes the dominant icon in contemporary poster culture, the hand-painted, 'authentic' Bollywood poster acquires auratic power as collectors and museums compete with their own collections.

Now framed as a dying art form, or as a print of cultural history, the traditional poster acquires the status of a new commodity even as the contemporary form itself gets more commodified and influenced by techniques of advertising. As collectors vie for the possession of posters that are subsequently sold in the market at exorbi-



tant prices, the former film poster enters the chain of commodity exchange, once easily accessible but today a rare item and piece of artwork. Collectors deploy their entrepreneurial skills to divert the poster away from its customary circuit, in the process accruing it with 'aesthetic power'.

**A** collection can be defined as 'a set of natural or artificial objects kept temporarily or permanently out of the economic circuit, afforded special protection in enclosed places adapted specifically for that purpose and put on display.'<sup>37</sup> Here the collected objects are not preserved for their usefulness but for their ability to produce a regime of meaning that can participate in the exchange process between visible and invisible worlds.

This formulation is interesting in the case of the film poster. Once the digitized image became the dominant form, the older hand painted image which evoked a cinematic past different from the one we are living through, had to be made invisible for a while. Suddenly the easily accessible poster, once available in the streets and with distributors, has today become inaccessible.

Something has clearly changed. Several collectors who had been collecting for a while became important players. Exhibitions of framed film posters are now being held at galleries in Bombay, Delhi and London. For an auction last year curated by Neville Tuli, more than hundred film posters were up for sale. The interesting thing about this exhibition/auction was that film posters were included as part of an art exhibition. The average price of a poster is anything between rupees 15,000 to 40,000. In the introduction to the catalogue, Tuli says that by positioning 'a *Deewar* poster, with all its loud colours, seething energy and emotional links, "besides" the tranquil

contemplation of a Gaitonde water colour, many new and unseen inter-relationships will open up, naturally changing the perception of each in the process.'<sup>38</sup>

As the aura of 'art' descends to swallow the popularity of the former film poster, we are left in a quandary about the future of this image. The inaccessibility and exclusivity of the 'rare' film poster can be easily overcome by almost everyone who has access to computer technology. A simple scanned duplication, colour corrected digitally to make it sharp can then be printed out for mass marketing. If done so it will surely disrupt the current status of the classic film poster as 'art' object available only to a select few. What exactly led to this sudden desire for the old poster is difficult to chart out instantaneously but clearly the rise of nostalgia in a moment of hyper visual intensity needs to be recognized.

**W**hile there is little dispute about the existence of a new regime of visual culture linked to television, the persistence of older images that signify a different register of time has also proliferated with the entry of cable television. Channels like Star Gold, Sony and Zee are all engaged in the telecast of older films which in the pre channel days only had Doordarshan's Sunday night screening time as its exhibition outlet. The proliferation of channels and particular programmes geared to evoke a nostalgic journey into a cinematic history has led to a situation where the hyper moment of the here and the now co-exists almost spectacularly with past images.

Star Gold's black and white films, Javed Akhtar's programme *Rahen Na Rahen* where he introduces older films, the evocation of memory in the programme *Yadein* on the same channel, documentary programmes

on stars and directors of yesteryears, are now being churned out to occupy the space and time offered by so many channels. Bombay films, both old and new appeal to a cross generational audience which is what television tries to negotiate through its programming. As black and white and colour, old and new, then and now, past and present coexist in the landscape of the contemporary in more powerful and spectacular ways than before because of television, nostalgia and popular memory come alive.

**T**he flashback into the past, a common trope of many Bombay films, works through television to create multiple time zones, generating the desire for possession, control, sustenance and tactile fulfilment. Collectors of artifacts and objects, posters and photographs, paintings and old books recognize the power of nostalgia within modernity. The collector engages in the process of diversion precisely to enhance the aesthetic power of his/her collection. The hand painted film poster today is a collector's item, a commodity enclosed and rarified, a product of nostalgia, 'entrepreneurial genius', popular memory and modernity.

#### End Notes

1. This essay is an initial attempt, part of ongoing research that tries to understand the material life of the Bombay film poster. The research is supported by the India Foundation for the Arts (IFA), Bangalore and the Fundacao Oriente.

2. The biographical method adopted here is inspired by the work of Igor Kopytoff. See his 'The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process', in Arjun Appadurai (ed.), *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*. Cambridge University Press, 1986, 64-91.

3. Ibid.

4. Op. cit. Kopytoff, 67-68.

5. Kajri Jain, 'Of the Everyday and the National Pencil: Calendars in Postcolonial



India. *Journal of Arts and Ideas*, No. 27-28, 1995.

6. Rachel Dwyer and Divia Patel, *The Visual Culture of Hindi Film*. Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, New Jersey, 2002: 110.

7. It is not my intention here to chart out a historical chronology of the different influences and artistic achievements of the poster. For a history of the development of the film poster see *ibid.* Patel and Dwyer's chapter on film advertising presents us with the details of early film publicity and the transformations over time.

8. The Bengal Act 21 of 1976, section 3(1) says 'whoever defaces any property in public view by writing or marking with ink, chalk, paint or any other material... shall be punishable with imprisonment... or with fines... or both.' This was later extended to other states like Delhi. The implementation of this act has affected both Calcutta and Delhi. Bombay continues to be a city where posters are plastered regularly. Even in Delhi and Calcutta, there are many areas of the city, particularly the older parts where posters can still be seen on the walls.

9. For interesting accounts of the production and circulation of calendar art see *op. cit.* Kajri Jain. While Jain makes a distinction between the cinema and calendar art, she does see a similarity in the role and movement of the poster and calendars. I do believe the direct relationship to film publicity makes the poster somewhat different.

10. Steve Neale, 'Poster - Film - Industry', in *Selling Dreams: British and American Posters 1890-1976*. Welsh Arts Council, 1988, 4-8.

11. Toby Miller, *Technologies of Truth: Cultural Citizenship and the Popular Media*. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, London, 1998, 18.

12. The role of genre is clearly a universal phenomenon amply demonstrated through analysis of posters in other parts of the world like Hollywood, Mexico and Turkey. See Rogelio Agraman, 'Poster Art from the Golden Era of Mexican Cinema', in *Archirol Filmico Agraman*, *Universidad de Gnadalahara Instituto Mexicano de Cinematografia*, 1997, and Steve Schapiro & David Chierichetti, *The Movie Poster Book*. E.P Dutton, New York, 1979.

13. Interview with Simrat Brar, designer for Glamour Publicity, Bombay, November 2002.

14. Christin Gledhill (ed.), *Stardom: Industry of Desire*. Routledge, London, 1991; Jacky Stacey, *Star Gazing: Hollywood Cinema and Female Spectatorship*. Routledge, London, 1994; Richard Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies*. St. Martins Press, New York, 1986.

15. Interview with Simrat Brar, Bombay, November 2002.

16. Conversation with scriptwriter, Javed Akhtar, Bombay March 1995. Akhtar recalled how Ramesh Sippy called a meeting of the lead

stars and the scriptwriters to discuss possible modifications to the films ending and a reworking of the Gabbar Singh persona which many had seen as excessively cruel. Everyone decided to wait for another week. The story of *Sholay*'s subsequent success is now part of film folklore.

17. Interview with Ajay Kapoor (poster printer), Delhi, February 2003.

18. Interview with Gul Sugandh, the owner of Glamour Publicity, Bombay, November 2002.

19. Interview with Sanjay Mehta (a distributor based in Delhi), August 2002.

20. Interview with Fayaz Baddrudin, designer for Yashraj Films' Design Cell, Bombay, November 2002.

21. Interestingly all the early posters used to have Hindi, English and Urdu titles.

22. Interview with Ajay Kapoor (printer), Delhi, February 2003.

23. Conversation with actor Aamir Khan, Bombay, November 1997.

24. Interview with Gul Sugandh, Glamour Publicity, Bombay, November 2002.

25. Posters are usually released in two batches. The first release is concurrent with the music/audio release, usually seen in music shops and electronic markets like Palika Bazaar in Delhi.

26. Some of the well known design houses are Glamour, H.R Enterprises, Abel and Will, Studio Links, Epigram and Endeavour.

27. Interview with Ajay Kapoor (printer), Delhi, February 2003.

28. Interview with Simrat Brar, Bombay, November 2002.

29. The 'cut and paste' method is still prevalent in the local designs of some of the smaller budget films, particularly in the C circuit.

30. Interview with Rahul Nanda (HR Enterprises), Bombay, November 2002.

31. Janet Ward, *Weimar Surfaces: Urban Visual Culture in 1920s Germany*. University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, 2001: 1.

32. *Ibid.*

33. The term is taken from Anna McCarthy's work on the role of television in public life: See her *Ambient Television: Visual Culture and Public Space*. Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2001.

34. 'The Work of Art in the Era of Mechanical Reproduction', in *Illuminations*, Schocken Books, New York, 1969, 217-251.

35. *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*. Cambridge University Press, 1986: 28.

36. *Ibid.*

37. Krzysztof Pomian, *Collectors and Curiosities: Paris and Venice, 1500-1800*. Polity Press, Cambridge, 1990: 9.

38. See the catalogue, *A Historical Mela: The ABC of India: The Art, Book & Cinema*. OSIAN's and Mapin, 2002.

# India's experience with the multiplex

APARNA SHARMA

IT is unlikely that India's experience with the multiplex form of cinematic exhibition can be comprehended without understanding the mechanisms of the liberalized economy in which it emanated. But to locate its persona and impact as being solely the affections stemming thereof would in some ways amount to a limited and inadequately informed view. Since its inauguration in 1997, the Indian multiplex experience has been smattered with instances that stand in

opposition to its immediate environs. Incoherent, inconsistent, possibly transitional yet aggressively attentive, these lend to it markings of an indigenous, self-derived and developed nature.

Though patterned along the 'shopping mall' model of the multiplex as developed and prevalent in the West, and sustained by the retail boom unleashed by the economic liberalization policy of 1991, the Indian multiplex site sports all the features

of an up-market turf. It has aligned with and extended the transformation of India's urban milieus being re-visioned within the framework of consumerism. The multiplex's steady proliferation in the metropolis's and simultaneous penetration into some smaller cities and towns testifies to its increasing popularity, coinciding with the rise of disposable incomes in the hands of the urban Indian family.

But in terms of its exhibit, i.e. the films on its screens, it makes for a space that mirrors a complex cinematic multiplicity. The increasingly curious mix of parallel, regional and art cinema along with the mainstream, both domestic and foreign, is what distinguishes most multiplexes in India, such that the Indian multiplex has come to position itself, not so much by identifying with particular kinds of films, as by being a theatre for accessing the 'latest' from a wide spread of cinematic fare – mainstream or fringe – in comfortable, colourful and inviting surroundings.

**W**hile the former, mostly Bollywood films which, given their steadily improving production quality and contact with newer territories, especially overseas markets, aligned quickly with the multiplex's swanky appearance, the latter too, mostly low budget, non-narrative films, easily if not as promptly, penetrated into the multiplex without bearing any proximity with the site or its vicinity which is enlivened with an array of branded local and global products and services.

The multiplex intervention, as of the moment, can be termed as appropriating varying audience segments to stabilize and secure its own position, establish its distinction and engage the audiences in a varying film viewing exercise. It has emerged as comprising a mix of seemingly contradictory strains wherein central and peripheral

tendencies coexist. Taking cues from each other, multiplexes all over the country are making for variables that don't just originate in, or correspond with, the existing common needs of their audiences, but have also identified and accommodated overlapping tastes and preferences by readying access to fare, which may have previously been considered as lacking numerical encouragement vital for profitability.

**M**ost art films and much of parallel cinema have usually faced reluctance from distributors and exhibitors alike. Given the limited response they face, bodies like the National Film Development Corporation (NFDC) have regularly stepped in to support them financially alongside promoting them at foras like film festivals and national network television. Their penetration into the multiplex can first be located in simple mathematics – the proliferation of screens, enhancing access to films. More important than simply the number of screens is the fact that even though more cinemas are getting converted and new multiplexes are being set up, the number of seats has not increased in equal proportion. It is only when new multiplexes are constructed that seating capacity has recorded an increase.

While the capacity at a single screen cinema is usually in the region of 850 to 1000 seats, or sometimes a little over that, a single screen in a multiplex seats a far smaller audience, because when a cinema is converted from one to multiple screens the seats get divided among them, though not equally. Anupam PVR, India's first multiplex situated in Delhi, was converted to four screens, two with a capacity of over 300 seats and the others with 150 seats.

The pattern continued, shaping into a trend, with the result that even

when a new multiplex is constructed the seating capacity per screen rarely parallels that of a single screen hall. Consequently, the number of admissions per screen stands far reduced at the multiplex. However, though non-mainstream films are unlikely to attract audiences of the size as a conventional Bollywood film would, their showings are still lucrative because the numbers they command constitute a greater, more competitive marginal value.

Further, the multiplex has not followed the conventional 12-3-6-9 time schedule as prevalent in most cinemas. This created opportunity to schedule and programme films on the different screens. The ability to manipulate schedules allowed for films of varying lengths to be accommodated. Since non-mainstream films are of varying lengths and usually shorter than an average feature, they could easily be integrated in the multiplex's film menu.

Multiplexes have charted cautiously in relation to industry films. In relation to Bollywood, multiplexes have not depended entirely on conventional films as they are in any case competing with the single screen cinemas which draw larger audiences. This is not only because they have a greater seating capacity, but because they are more accessible. They usually outnumber multiplexes, are located within easy reach and, more importantly, offer the same product at a lower price.

**B**esides, a thriving video piracy industry coupled with a deep penetration of cable television, meant that the multiplex settled for exhibiting selected films – usually the awaited, big budget, publicized, mostly familial films. These films coincide with the multiplex's redefinition of cinema as a family outing comprising other amenities like food and games. Since

it needs only a section that would guarantee a sell out of its limited seats being offered at a higher rate, it tends to exclude the average Bollywood film. But in so doing it has managed to elicit viewership from upper class segments, who previously may have held reservations towards cinema going, given the lack of facilities like air-conditioning, upscale interiors and so on.

In relation to Hollywood films too, multiplexes find themselves playing on limited ground as releases in non-western territories are usually a couple of months after the film's release in home territories. And the access to films through DVDs before a theatrical release (at least in metropolis's) has implied a replication of the approach as adopted towards Bollywood films.

Initially, multiplexes were projected primarily as theatres for English films. That changed soon, because despite their popularity English films are rarely accessed by non-English speaking, illiterate and non-affluent audiences. These films seldom transcend metropolis's and large cities and, on the screens, they compete for space with films from a flourishing native industry that appeal to a wider audience. The apprehension towards foreign films is not determined by the urban or linguistic divide only. Within the different income regions of say a metropolis itself, one finds multiplexes located in posh localities exhibiting foreign films along with substantial numbers of non-mainstream films. However, when located in the lower income group areas, multiplexes get smaller, being composed of fewer screens and English films (mostly well advertised ones) constitute a smaller portion of the assortment.

As one moves away from the Hindi heartland, the film menu tilts

correspondingly in favour of native languages and no longer reads bilingually (i.e. comprising only Hindi and English films). Neither is it always trilingual, say in cities like Mumbai and Delhi, or regions such as South India. Here films in the immediate native language get complemented with those from other regions, in differing dialects.

With the multiple screens accommodating a spillover of linguistic access that may be rooted in a host of factors – education, migration, employment and training or just proximity – this gets converted into overlapping cinematic preferences. The variation is not simply of language, but extends to genre as well, including treatment in relation to content and construction in terms of form.

Responses at the multiplex to the non-mainstream films have not been completely negative. In fact, a few low-budget, non-mainstream films, despite a cast comprising prominent film stars, could only secure screening at multiplexes in some territories. Such a trend coupled with the entry of vernacular films into non-native regional territories, and an active Indo-western intersection has also facilitated the entry of non-mainstream English and non-English foreign films into some multiplexes.

The multiplex also constitutes the primary site for the increasing territory of films directed by overseas Indians, whose representations span both the Indian diaspora and the homeland. Sociological in their orientations while dealing with the diaspora, these present traditions and lifestyles as altered by being away from the homeland; and in terms of the homeland, they highlight native habits and attitudes as seen from a 'foreign' eye. Explicated mostly in humorous, familial scenarios that involve the play of

customs and rituals along with the essential element of entertainment materializing in song and dance, these films are developed along non-native patterns of construction, aesthetic and language.

Their duration too is a variable, almost always under three hours. Despite being located within the native community and thus being readily decipherable, they too like other foreign films have enjoyed limited appeal not extending beyond the largely educated audience that's bilingual and enjoys familiarity with diaspora experiences and attitudes. Though films surrounded with more publicity are played at a few single screen halls as well, the multiplex is more promptly identified with non-native cinema. Add to that the fate of films like *Fire* (1997), and the polarization between the single screen and multiplex cinemas stands further sharpened.

Given the fast pace of its spread, its acumen towards cinema of diverse kinds and a long gestation period, central and state governments are encouraging major investment and offering sops to investors and developers who comprise real estate entities, film exhibitors and distributors, film processing companies and media conglomerates. But the concessions are accompanied with conditionalities aimed to prevent concentration of multiplexes in select regions and in some cases to promote regional cinema. A microcosm of retail culture including significant portions of global brand names, the multiplex site makes for the kind of up-beat location that coincides with government attempts to alter conventional images and all that compliments the bandwagon. It also enables foreign tourists to access cinema.

While multiplexes may be emerging as local macrocosms of

native and foreign cinema, they constitute a kind of exception when compared with their western counterparts, most of who pressured by their functional mechanisms and operating in advanced, more developed markets characterized by deeply entrenched segmentation which extends into film exhibition as well, have ended up institutionalizing and popularizing the blockbuster syndrome. It is thus necessary to recollect a few trends that may not bear directly on the subject but do not bypass it either, having operated upon audiences as much as the multiplex itself has.

**F**irst, the multiplex is preceded by and concurrent with a tradition in parallel cinema that reached a peak in the 1970s. More recently a trend in rethinking, innovative cinema has gained prominence for confronting pressing social and political issues like feudalism, sexuality, terrorism and separatist movements within the scale of mainstream films. These films occupy the space between the mainstream and art film, reaching audiences without the essential melodrama typical of Bollywood films in which characters are foregrounded, on occasions distanced, from their milieu. These films situate sharply defined characters as the site where the opposing pulls of an irreconcilable crisis operate. They have gained critical acclaim at home and abroad alongside box office endorsement. While the attraction of some can be located in the dynamics of stardom and a heady mix of song and dance, all interpellate the audience through commonplace situations, traumas and experiences.

Despite the difficulties it faces, the fringe comprising art and off-beat films has been sustained both independently and in collaboration with firmly positioned industry players. Similarly, it is important to remem-

ber that non-Hollywood cinema too has commanded an audience promoted by international film festivals, film study circles, national network television and cross-cultural exchange programmes with other nations. The preponderance of single screen cinemas has not come in the way of screening critically acclaimed foreign films from time to time.

Second, in the backdrop of a film industry steeped in financial crisis, the small budget and independent films have received considerable approval and encouragement when compared with the industry product. With off-beat content and newer forms, their slice of the cinema is expanding. For them too, the multiplex constitutes a crucial exhibition space, given that they target specific rather than mass audiences.

**T**hird, and to further unpack the possibilities at the multiplex, a brief recap of the functional impulse/s for it is vital. Upon introduction of liberalization, retail chains emerged and expanded as the momentum of consumerism slowly rose. Consequently, retail spaces steadily gained premium over commercial ones. Strategies to cover costs had to be revised. While rethinking products, prices and efficiency, retailers linked promotions, fun and entertainment to penetrate bigger chunks of the market and secure customer loyalty through customization.

In a climate of alliances and add-ons like food joints, the concept of holistic family entertainment experiences gained patronage. In such a scenario, the immensely popular leisure activity far older than television in India – cinema – suffering from inadequate exhibition facilities intersected with aggressive retailing and helped prompt the multiplex. This served to revive the diminishing cinema going habit by enticing audi-

ences away from their television sets, with their clutter of imagery from all over the world drawing upon the cable and satellite boom. The desire for the image now combined with other leisure activities and occupations.

**O**nce in place, the multiplex developed a counter to the unitary propensity of the single screen hall, founded on exclusion, perpetuating homogeneity and cultivating committed audience segments. While single screen cinemas identify themselves with films of particular kinds, say the Hindi *masala* and blockbuster, the English, or the porn movie, the multiplex has capitalised on an inclusive tendency to motivate and assemble diverse audiences.

On the one hand it has contained the influence of embourgeoisement forces within its edifice, allowing on its screens the interplay of alternative and mainstream or conventional strains. Further it has limited contact with the West to no more than the fashioning of its site, preventing the hegemony of either Hollywood blockbusters as the result of a partial global encounter, or conventional Bollywood films that enjoy a pan-linguistic and cultural appeal cutting across regional, religious, class and other variants. On the other hand, it has remained an urban, largely middle and upper middle class leisure pursuit, with its highly priced tickets excluding the masses crowded in the lower regions of the income graph.

While the masses take to cinema readily, given their financial capacity and lack of identification with the plush appearance, products and services at the multiplex – in any case targeted at the socially and economically mobile sections – this numerically significant chunk of audience has remained confined to the outer edges of the multiplex experience. And it

is unlikely that the dynamics of the multiplex in its present *avatar* will manage to secure their participation. Spatially too, multiplexes can mostly be spotted in affluent neighbourhoods, within the easy reach and concentration of young audiences.

So far a nascent experience, the number of multiplexes is soon slated to rise sharply. The full impact of its rapid spread, particularly over the last two years, is yet to be determined given the long gestation periods and concentration in and around selected pockets. As a result, it is too early to draw any conclusions about its impact or chart any definite course for its future.

Going by the variables that are emerging in response to the needs of immediate audiences, and the fact that in its present form it has acknowledged cinema as composed of diverse possibilities, the multiplex may in the future enhance segmentation and result in branded theatres exhibiting particular fare, say the art, mainstream, or foreign films, maybe even documentaries. The mechanisms of competition would then come into operation and influence aspects such as ticket pricing.

**A**s a space commanding flexibility and an ease with manoeuvrability, the multiplex, concurrent as it is with the digital revolution, could even aid in the promotion of the format. Not simply by providing accompanying exhibition facilities like digital projection or digital sound, but by making available alternative display spaces for digital films that bear potential as a distinct genre. With the conveniences of its apparatuses, film form is already witnessing alteration in some parts of the world, and filmmakers without access to elaborate film equipment have received a fillip from this technology.

New territories in relation to content are being explored by a breed

of filmmakers who are exploiting the ease of accessibility accompanying the medium. Redefining film form and content, digital films could prompt and occupy viewing spaces as differing from conventional films and embody forms like the 'walk through' film that may require simultaneous projection on more than one screen, not necessarily of conventional theatre size.

**F**rom its present shape, there only emerge more queries than any concrete predictions. Will the rapid spread of the multiplex and its concentration in particular zones with audiences constituting existing and potential markets for the retail entities supporting the multiplex, emerge as the dominant trend, and push doors for further segregation and institutionalization of segmented audiences, leading to branded multiplexes? Or will encouragement from the various governments drive away the multiplex, aiding its penetration into other urban and semi urban, non-affluent territories? Will the multiplex alter existing film form so as to align with its own plush and colourful appearance? Or will it encourage alternative films?

Its dispersal away from well-heeled spaces is crucial if the intention is for it to emerge as at least a pan-urban, if not a pan-Indian experience. Well meaning as government policies may be, without their committed implementation and in the absence of the shopping mall culture in other locales, the possibilities of the multiplex there remain suspect. But in the meanwhile cinema stands redefined for the Indian viewer as composed of fare other than the regular three-hour film. From the present assortment at least, sporadic and transitional as it may be, there are definitely more films to choose from. And the choices aren't merely linguistic.

# Film culture, politics and industry

S.V. SRINIVAS

IN this essay I discuss a familiar question: what do we make of film as industrial product and film as cultural entity? For the purposes of the essay I use 'film culture' in a restricted sense to refer to film consumption, or the sphere of circulation of the cinema among various audience groups. At the very outset I wish to point out that I make a number of statements, at times provocative, without providing satisfactory clarifications or evidence. This is a convenient way to deal with difficult problems. However, I may be forgiven for opting for the easy way out in light of the constraints of space (and the inability to provide detailed footnotes).

In the context of Andhra Pradesh, possibly other parts of the country as well, film consumption is linked to politics on the one hand and the film industry on the other. I am not referring merely to the famous 'south Indian' case of fans associations of the film-stars-turned-politicians. On the contrary, we need to ask foundational

questions of film culture that may in fact have been obscured by the overt linkages between film and politics as witnessed in the MGR and NTR phenomena.

Yet, fans associations in Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and, increasingly, even Kerala, should alert us to deeper connections between film cultures and politics. It is my contention that these connections exist even when there are no direct links between audience groups and political parties and even when fans associations themselves are absent. Indeed, fans associations, regardless of what is said about their linkages with the politics of linguistic identity/nationalism and so on, are but one expression of something that we may have missed in our anxiety to make sense of the obscene overlap between the cinema and politics.

I will draw attention to the circulation of Hong Kong action films in India in order to skirt around the politics of linguistic identity. Despite the popularity of the genre and some of the stars associated with it in different parts of Andhra Pradesh, it is almost certain that there have never been fans associations of a Bruce Lee or Jackie Chan in this state. In fact, fans asso-

\*This essay is based on the research conducted for the SEPHIS post-doctoral project titled, 'Democracy and Spectatorship in India: Telugu Popular Cinema and Hong Kong Action Film.' Much of the essay is a direct outcome of my engagement with Ashish Rajadhyaksha's published and unpublished work.

ciations of Hong Kong stars are so emphatically absent that there was no competing response to the inauguration of the All India Jackie Chan Fans Association in Vijayawada. As it turned out this association was an attempt by a local distributor to generate interest in the latest Jackie Chan release. He hoped that 'real' associations of the star's fans would be established in response to the announcement. The distributor's failure to elicit a response is more evidence that fans associations and language politics are inseparable.

However, considering the fact that fans associations are institutions marked by their obsessive engagement with the cinema (noisy celebrations within the auditorium, decoration of cinema halls), which is carried to spaces outside/beyond the cinema hall (organizing feeding of the poor, celebrating religious festivals under the aegis of the association), we notice that a similar process is at work even in the case of Hong Kong films. I have in mind those martial arts schools/academies that exhibit rather direct allegiances to Hong Kong films and stars.

**T**here are of course 'respectable' martial arts schools run by experts who sneer at films and stars. But there are others like the Dragon Fist Martial Arts Academy, Hyderabad. It is named after a Jackie Chan film (*Dragon Fist*, Lo Wei, 1978), has an office displaying a large Bruce Lee poster, and is run by a man who tried unsuccessfully to make a Telugu martial arts film called *Karate Fighters*. The school's publication, *Martial Arts*, often features local and Hong Kong action stars such as Suman, Vijayashanthi, Bruce Lee and Jackie Chan on the cover.

And then there is Sampathi Ramana, the chief instructor of Okinawan Goju-Ryu Universal Martial

Arts, Madanapalle. A house painter by profession, Ramana is an important organizer of the Baliya caste and an activist of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). He is also an active member of the fans association of the Telugu film star Chiranjeevi who belongs to his caste. For the last 13 years he has been a karate instructor. Five years ago he established the karate school which he currently heads.

**C**lasses are held, among other places, in the compound of Jyothi Talkies which screens martial arts and sex films. Ramana was inspired to learn karate after watching the films of Bruce Lee and Arjun (who featured in Telugu action films). He watches all Hong Kong martial arts and action films released in the town and often takes his students to watch (and learn from) these films. Some martial arts schools are therefore fans-association-like formations insofar as they are institutional spaces for the *acting out* of the obsession with the cinema. With hindsight, we can see that the fans association itself is only one such space.

The cinema is so central to our lives that there are various manifestation of the obsession with it. For the purposes of this essay I will ignore possible psychological explanations for the phenomenon. A historical explanation for the social-political importance of the cinema in the Indian context is provided by K. Sivathamby who famously states:

The cinema hall was the first performance centre in which all Tamils sat under the same roof. The basis of the seating is not on the hierarchic position of the patron but essentially on his purchasing power. If he cannot afford paying the higher rate, he has either to keep away from the performance or be with 'all and sundry' (Sivathamby 1981: 18).

Even if cinema is not the 'first' and although the possibilities it opened up are not unique to Tamil Nadu, it is possible to argue after Sivathamby that the promise of democracy, whether or not it was realized, is what makes the cinema *political*. DMK, MGR, and NTR phenomena are specific but secondary manifestations of the founding promise of the cinema.

This promise revolves around the fact of physical presence: I am entitled to be present here, regardless of everything else. Often there is an inversion of the obvious fact of the presence of the viewer at the cinema in the following manner: the cinema exists because of my presence and for me. Further, the 'I' at the cinema is always a member of a collective: *we make the film happen*. Anyone who has watched a Chiranjeevi or Rajinikanth film knows exactly what I am talking about. Not only do these stars address spectators in rather direct ways (including by looking at the camera) but seem to perform according to 'our' demands – notice that the whistling actually begins a few seconds *before* these stars make their first and much anticipated appearance, as if by whistling we can summon them to appear. Of course this is an inversion – *we* have been trained over generations to anticipate the action as much as the stars have been to perform to our expectations.

**F**ilm culture in our context is political for the following reasons: it is founded on a democratic promise and it develops around the notion of spectatorial rights. I not only have a right to be present in the cinema hall but have the further right to make demands of the narrative, the star, etc. The cinema has to acknowledge my presence and address my expectations.

A note of caution at this point. We cannot make sense of cinema in



general and film culture(s) in particular if we assume that audiences are either manipulated or resisting collectives. Both approaches, which are mirror images, posit an antagonistic relationship between the film industry and its customers. In fact the political cannot be reduced to the question: is it progressive/regressive? We need to pitch the question of the political at a different level.

The film industry plays a crucial role in the emergence of a film culture. This ought to be fairly obvious once we move away from the manipulation/resistance frame and the non-existent opposition between industry and viewer. Before I discuss the industry-film culture relationship, a brief aside on the peculiar status of the film industry in India is in order.

Once again I will cite the case of Hong Kong action films in India. The financial worth of the Indian market is so miniscule for the Hong Kong film industry that in the words of the distribution executive, Chiu Yi Leung, the Indian market is 'just a bonus'. According to Wellington Fung, the former CEO of Media Asia Distribution, Hong Kong, the volume of film exports to India is about half a million US dollars a year. This is small even by Indian film industry standards. Telugu blockbusters could cost up to four times this amount to produce.

Contrast the low financial worth of Hong Kong films to the kind of cultural presence they have had in Andhra Pradesh. I have already mentioned martial arts schools. In print, Hong Kong action films have spawned a new genre of 'detective' fiction and numerous self-help books (learn-kung-fu-in-thirty-days and such like). A new generation of stars performing their own stunts and supposedly trained in East Asian martial arts

emerged in the late seventies, even as the film industry's biggest star N.T. Rama Rao played the role of a karate champion in *Yugapurushudu* (K. Bapaiah, 1978).

The female vigilante film, often featuring 'Lady Superstar' Vijaya-shanthi, is as much a tribute to the female action stars of Hong Kong as the indigenous 'cow girls' of the earlier decades. Not to forget remakes such as *Hello Brother* (EVV Satyanarayana, 1994), which is based on the Jackie Chan starrer *Twin Dragons* (Tsui Hark, Ringo Lam, 1992). There have also been attempts at producing full-length martial arts films (for example, *Bhadrachalam*, Shankar, 2001).

The larger issue, of which the Hong Kong films in Andhra is a case in point, is the vast gap between the financial worth of the film industry and the all too visible cultural presence of the cinema in spaces well beyond the cinema hall. On the one hand, the cultural presence of the cinema is phenomenal, perhaps unparalleled in any other part of the world. On the other, the industry is unable to translate the socio-cultural importance of the cinema in our country into economic terms. Cultural success and economic failure are both equally glaring. Ashish Rajadhyaksha describes the phenomenon as the industry's 'resistance to industrialism' (Rajadhyaksha, 2002). The phrase sums up the inability of the industry to generate profit, attract institutional investment and to standardize the product (the alleged absence of the script and other related shortcomings are often listed at year-end reviews of our various film industries).

The lack of fit between the film industry as an economic entity and cinema as a cultural, social and political phenomenon is of crucial impor-

tance in our context. This excess of signification, of meaning, is something that the film industry has to grapple with on a day-to-day basis.

We need to conceive of film cultures as being excessive of the economic logic of the film industry, not as resistant to some prior political intention of the industry. This is not to say that the film industry is not interested in consumer compliance or in the production of a mass audience whose reaction is predictable. As a matter of fact a variety of coercive and pedagogic exercises have been and continue to be undertaken towards this end (discussed below). Remarkably, the industry is also indulgent towards audiences and their excesses. For this reason I suggest that the film industry's link to film cultures has to be subjected to detailed examination. Let me illustrate by examining what I call the *B circuits* of distribution and exhibition. Once again I will stay with Hong Kong films and their circulation in this circuit.

The B circuit is the vast segment of the film industry that comprises of hundreds of small distribution companies (often dealing with re-runs, soft-porn films, cheap imports, films dubbed from other languages etc.) and run down cinema halls in cities (the legendary Lighthouse in Abids, Hyderabad, which is now closed, for example) as well as small towns. Characterized by low levels of investment, this segment is witness to repeated interventions by both distributors and exhibitors which result in the de-standardization of a film's status as an industrial product. Another distinction of the B circuit is its questionable legality: condemned prints, uncensored films, censored films with sexually explicit interpolations, and prints whose rights have lapsed are to be found circulating here.

In qualitative terms, the B circuit is the 'final frontier' of the film industry – beyond this there is no market. Films reach this segment after their run in the more profitable distribution and exhibition circuit is over. So that what we get here is the local industry's equivalent of what the Indian market is to the Hong Kong film industry ('just a bonus').

**I**n geographical terms the B distributor is generally confined to territories consisting primarily of non-metropolitan centres. Most cinema halls available to such distributors are run down and have low ticket prices (around ten rupees for the highest seats). The margins are so low that it is not economically viable for major players to operate at this level.

I am aware that I am not the only one trying to understand this segment of the industry. Bhri Gupta Singh, for instance, is working with a concept he calls the C circuit. I would like to think of the B circuit as an analytical category rather than a merely descriptive one. Two sets of existing film industry categories and the B circuit need to be distinguished. The industry categorizes exhibition centres as A, B and C class centres on the basis of market size, often measured in terms of the population of the place. The industry also divides cinema halls into A, B and C categories based on location as well as the kind of facilities they offer. The B circuit, I suggest, is a segment of the industry that cuts across existing industry categories: it is inclusive of B and C class cinema halls in A, B and C centres and the distributors who feed these cinema halls.

As an analytical category the B circuit might allow us to distinguish between different ways in which the film industry functions. At a time when there are clear signs of industrialization, especially of the distribution

and exhibition sectors (cineplexes, increasing importance of overseas distribution, dubbing of Hollywood films into local languages), there is a need to account for what is happening in those segments of the industry that are evidently unaffected by such changes.

Hong Kong cinema has been a success in the B circuit. The point is not that it is a hit with the lower classes or the small town audiences but that the B circuit distributors actively promote it using a variety of means and in doing so demonstrate the enormous disparity between economic worth of film (this time an import) and its cultural significance. The life of Hong Kong cinema in the B circuit needs to be read against the backdrop of the street corner martial arts school, the Telugu detective novel and other phenomena that exhibit the 'influence' of the genre. In rather direct ways these are consequences of the B circuit intervention.

**F**or Hong Kong films in the B circuit it is not uncommon for a film's title to change each time it is re-released. On occasion film publicity is misleading: one distributor sought to create the impression that he was releasing new films when the renamed older Jackie Chan films to echo recent releases (*I am I* was the name given to the older *Thunderbolt* as a response to *Who am I?* and *Drunken Master II* was renamed *Dangerous Guy* when *Mr. Nice Guy* was being released). Another ingenious distributor claimed that a film had stars who were 'faster than Jet Li and Jackie Chan' but made sure that 'faster than' was in small letters so as to create the impression that the two giants of Hong Kong cinema were starring in the film.

Typically, in the B circuit, relatively minor or unknown Hong Kong stars are often passed off as relatives/

associates of major ones. We have the actor-director Sammo Hung being introduced in locally produced film publicity as Jackie Chan's 'guru'. A female action star was claimed to be Bruce Lee's daughter (a good five years before the 'real' daughter made her film debut). I would like to see these examples as attempting to do more than cheating the semi-literate action film buff.

**A**ttempts of the kind mentioned above no doubt *destabilize* films as products and would therefore be prime examples of the industry's resistance to industrialism. As Hollywood has shown, one of the necessary steps towards greater industrialization of cinema is to ensure standardized products as well as viewing conditions. By tailoring the publicity campaign to address what are seen as a given set of existing expectations, the B circuit puts itself at considerable risk: it acknowledges that viewer expectations are legitimate and goes on to meet them on grounds that place it at a considerable disadvantage.

When the distributor creates the grounds for comparing Sammo Hung and Jackie Chan, he is first supplying a star where there was none (Hung was not recognized as a star and consequently had no value locally). In the process, the distributor accepts as legitimate viewer expectation (treated as a given) that films should have stars of a certain kind. He is risking rejection since the viewer may watch the film and refuse to accept that there is a ground for comparison between the two stars or go to the extent of refusing to accord to Hung any star-value.

This specific kind of risk of rejection is not specific to Hong Kong films. It is not uncommon for cinema halls showing soft-porn films to have a riot on their hands when the audience is disappointed by the absence of the

mandatory explicit sequence. Having recognized illegitimate desires, the cinema hall risks retribution for not adequately addressing them. This is not a feature of the B circuit alone. In 1993 advertisements signed by 'Superstar' Krishna appeared in Telugu newspapers appealing to fans not to be upset with the star's role in the film *Vaarasadu* (E. V. V. Satyanarayana, 1993). The film had a sequence in which the younger Nagarjuna held Krishna by the collar. The *Vaarasadu* type campaign can only occur in a context in which the expectations of the 'fan', who in this case is organized, are treated as legitimate. What we may be witnessing in these instances is the industry's acknowledgement of spectatorial rights.

**W**hat of the industry's resistance to industrialism? Even as we acknowledge the interesting connections between the industry's backward industrial status, film cultures and politics, we need to note that industrial *aspirations* are frequently expressed by different segments of the industry. Let me cite a few examples to point out how complex an entity the film industry is. There has been some discussion on Rajnikanth's recent attempt to 'patent' a gesture he makes in the film *Baba* (Suresh Krishna, 2002). Lawrence Liang, I am sure has much to say about this in his essay. I will not go over the debate on the star's move here. I merely suggest that this is one of the many seemingly strange ways in which the industry attempts to assert its *industrial* status.

In the exhibition sector, attempts at disciplining the audience are key indicators of an industrial aspiration. Ensuring audience discipline is an established means of producing standardized conditions of viewing. Not surprisingly, discipline often accompanies increasing levels of comfort

offered to the customer. In Madanapalle, Srikrishna, the town's first air-conditioned cinema hall, segregates the sexes both at the booking counters and inside the auditorium. The management of the theatre does not permit the audience to whistle after the first week of a film's release. This, I argue, is an industrial aspiration of the kind that film history is familiar with and much has been said about this mode of cleaning up the cinema halls in the histories of American cinema.

**B**ut it is not only air-conditioned cinema halls aiming to attract the middle class customer that aspire to standardize the conditions of viewing. Jyothi theatre, also situated in Madanapalle, is a typical example of a B circuit cinema hall for it still has wooden benches in the lower stalls and is notorious for screening soft-porn films. When it screens a soft-porn film it ensures that the booking counter is closed when the film commences. No one is allowed to whistle or make lewd comments. No one can leave the auditorium till the screening is over. Precautions against police raids, certainly. But perfect customer compliance is achieved and stable conditions of viewing have been created.

In conclusion, theorising film culture might just be the most ambitious project undertaken by students of the cinema: not only does it have to grapple with the film industry, about which we know little, but also has to provide an account of what the political means in our context.

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# The kiss and Bhagat Singh

DILIP MENON

IT appears that Hindi films cannot bear too much reality. The heroine is raped but apart from a smudged *bindi* and a tear in the sleeve of her *choli*, she appears to be undamaged. Heroes are beaten up with rods, hockey sticks and chains but an insult to their mother or sister brings them back up on their feet never to lose the fight again. Children are separated at birth with nothing more than a fragment of song as their patrimony, yet they find each other amidst the teeming millions of India through absent-mindedly humming at the right moment.

The Hindi film is a foreign country; they do things differently there. Moreover, on no account do lovers kiss on screen, no matter that the throes of passion they are undergoing make them fling each other onto grass and take a cold shower in the rain. It is not the eccentricity of the Censor Board, nor indeed some deep seated Indian sense of values, perhaps not even the sense of the 'private' (that so-western idea) that the idea of the kiss conjures up.

The kiss is the only possibility of the real happening on the Hindi screen; hence it has to be banished.

Two lips have to meet, and perhaps even two tongues may have to probe. Unlike violence, rape and tears, the kiss, no matter the fact that it may carry no more emotion than a faint apprehension of halitosis, is too fleshly, too upsetting of the convention of the relation between art and reality.

The role that the real, i.e. the relation to a reality external to the economy of the space of the film plays in Hindi film, allows us to raise several kinds of questions: about the impossibility of a standard of realism, truth, as also history. We have to read the narratives produced by *Sholay* or *Love Ke Liye Kucch bhi Karega* or indeed, *Bhagat Singh*, in their own space; there is a need for immanence.

Not so long ago, Rajesh Khanna and Sanjeev Kumar portrayed teenagers in college, notwithstanding their gently swelling profiles. It was all about acting; if teenagers were played by teenagers then where was the art? While Aamir Khan may subscribe to the Lee Strasburg school and evoke Stanislavsky, Govinda's method, and popularity, lies in his refusal to get real. And arguably, even the characters played by the iconic Amitabh started

to appear more and more real as nature imitated art. As young men on the street swept their hair back with Brylcreem, growled, and disowned their illegitimate fathers, we looked from screen to person and person to screen and could not tell which was which.

**F**or an explanation, one could go back to classical Indian aesthetics with the actor as a mirror on which emotions appear and vanish; it was about representation not reality. Or one could look at the history of female impersonation in the modern India stage with the sexually ambiguous figures of Bal Gandharva and Sundari. At the turn of the last century, while women were good for walk-on parts and for playing a *pari* in a crowd, the real art lay in a man playing a woman. Or one could subscribe to the idea of the actor conveying a mode of actorly being, rather than a sense of being in the world. Looking at Shahrukh Khan (that consummately bad actor, asserting with ironic pride that he has five expressions in his repertoire) one sees a stratified history of Hindi film acting. He is the medium summoning up shades of Shammi Kapoor, Rajesh Khanna, Dilip Kumar, and at his best he is Amitabh. But we have been there. We are among family.

Acting in Mani Rathnam's film, *Dil Se*, Shahrukh is a disaster, he evokes for the Hindi film aficionado no sense of the familiar, and he is nothing but a real-seeming character. He does not contribute to the accumulating history of gesture, modulation and walk through which the Hindi film inflects the everyday presentation of self. Except the one classic moment where he dances on a train under the shadow of love with heaven under his feet. A moment that enters the history generated by Hindi cinema.

Unlike the Hindi film, one instance of the realist representation of

the dichotomy between character and actor can be found in Shaji Karun's *Vanaprastham*. Mohanlal plays a Kathakali performer, not in the prime of physical condition but at the peak of his acting prowess. He is desired by Suhasini, a wilful and passionate woman to whom he gives his heart only to discover that she is in love with the character of Arjuna that he plays so artfully, not him. This distinction is fundamental to an Indian aesthetic; Robert de Niro putting on weight to play Jake la Motta does not make sense within this frame. It is about reflecting, not embodying; the actor is a glass on which characters fleetingly appear in their fullness. One is reminded of a quote from another time and place. Laurence Olivier, observing Dustin Hoffman psyching himself up on the sets everyday to play a role in Stanislavski mode, wonders why the American actor can't get by without all this *sturm und drang*.

**A**nother way into this problem of perception is through looking at the lives and marriage of two sirens: Marilyn Monroe and our very own Mumtaz (now Mrs Madhvani). Joe di Maggio, one of Marilyn's many husbands, is said to have remarked that she did not measure up to the oomph she exuded on screen. Many years later, Dennis Rodman made a similar ill-mannered remark about Madonna, reflecting the fundamental collapse between character and actor that characterizes method-acting and its relation to reality. Mumtaz made the transition to Mrs Madhvani less traumatically, as had Saira Banu and, more recently, Mrs Nene. The Hindi film has its world and the other world goes on its own way.

Of course, this evocation of another reality, i.e. the space of the 'real' of the Hindi cinema need not necessarily arise from our incomplete

modernity, or the absence of an integrating public sphere or civil society. These kinds of arguments would be part of the wail that characterizes the writing of Indian history: we have not had capitalism, revolution, or even Marlon Brando. Realism then would be the space of Ray's sovereign subjects, to be appreciated by those schooled in the legacy of the Bengal Renaissance and for whom the *nouvelle vague* is not just vague, but in vogue. Gita Kapur's acute observation on modernism in Indian art that the 'modern' is emblematic in nature provides us with a clue towards understanding 'reality' in the same terms. In the Hindi film, reality is a heraldic sign, as can be seen in the different representation of poverty in say, *Lawaaris* and *Pather Panchali*; in the former it is the playing at being poor that is of the essence.

**O**ne way out of the reality problem has been to celebrate a space of viewing that determines the reality of the Hindi cinema: the slum's eye view – the space of nature red in tooth and claw. It is *Ganashatru vs Company*. To paraphrase Tolstoy, all realistic films are alike, but the Other (and we may yet have to find a suitable name for our beloved Hindi genre) is different each in its own way. One piquant instance which brings together the incommensurability of the space of the Hindi film and the space of the desire to be modern is that the first public act of violence by the Naxalites in Calcutta was the attack on a film theatre screening *Prem Pujari* for its 'inauthentic' representation of the Chinese.

If one were being sententious, and perhaps reactive, one could say, that the Hindi film is deliberately modern in that it creates an 'empty homogeneous time'. The characters live in the time of film, or indeed in the time of the Hindi film, with its own gene-

alogy stretching from Shantaram to Ramgopal Verma, from Harishchandra to Chandu. So we need to theorize the time of the film itself rather than the time in which the film is made. Otherwise, we too easily may read off the nation state, developmental paradigms, Nehruvian socialism and all our pet likes and anathemas into a space which cannot bear our seriousness.

As Althusser said, historians do not have a theory of time; they have a methodology and this generally involves putting all artifacts and ideas back into the linear flow of something called History. So while conservative historians may work on fifty year periods and the *Annales* School may work on four hundred year chunks, time itself remains untheorised. While thinking of the problem of the representation of time, a contrast may be made with films like *Run Lola Run* and *Speed* which work with a notion of real time: the time of the film is the time of the action.

**W**ithin Hindi films there is an articulation of several times, and the time of the real is only one of the many times. The song for instance, is in many instances the hammock in which characters take time off from the hustle and bustle of the film. Editing and the movement of the characters themselves come to be dictated by the rhythms of the music. Characters appear in flashbacks that are never seen again in the film, nor are their existence explained. And references to earlier films, characters, plots, dialogues abound; the attentive can see within every moment of the film a window into another time: Shahrukh's face as he looks at Kareena Kapoor for the first time in *Ashoka* takes us back to the grimaces of Shammi looking at Saira in *Junglee* or Rajesh Khanna telling Sharmila in *Amar Prem* that he hates tears. Real time is kept at bay.

One telling example is from *Naunehaal*, made in the 1960s, in which a group of children travel to Delhi to meet their beloved *chacha* Nehru only to discover that he has died in the meantime. The film then shows documentary footage of Nehru's funeral to the strains of Mohammad Rafi singing *Meri aawaz suno*. The problem of the real is handled as simultaneity: *meanwhile* in the real world... Film time and real time run in parallel; the latter is both subsumed as well as kept at a distance, it is not a *supplement*.

**T**herefore, both the project of writing a social history of Hindi film as well as reading history from the Hindi film is a fraught one. One kind of question which can lead us astray is the attempt to locate the audience of the film; who is it made for? At one level this is an impossible task if we are to move beyond prejudiced intuitions or the lie-game of statistics. It can only bring back more familiar, and misleading, questions like 'is the film the space of the popular imagination?', or 'is film nothing more than the product of a mass-culture industry?' invoking a search for authenticity or alienation, and autonomy or hegemony. And we will be back on the terrain of the commonplace queries of the social theory establishment.

Of course, the Hindi film is not an entirely autonomous space; it is made by directors funded by under-world transnational capital, acted out by stars from certain regions and with histories of drug abuse or the shooting of black bucks, and peopled by characters who may represent norms such as the Wife who is supportive of her Husband's Adultery and the Daughter in Law who wins over her Wicked Mother in Law through Pure Devotion. But there is an economy here which we need to understand on its

own terms. Films can survive in public memory on the strength of their dialogues alone, or their music (even a single song), or a single character. And as in the case of *Sholay*, the dialogues existed independently of the film. A Hindi film is the sum of its parts when it is a hit and when it is not each part stands alone. Here again we need to look at how these various elements are articulated within the economy of the film.

**T**here is a parallel here with the writing of history. Braudel has remarked on how different areas within a region may be incorporated into different times and different geographies within the world economy. So for instance while the port of Calicut in the 16th century may have responded to the financial rhythms of Amsterdam, further inland in Kerala, there would have been the time of earlier indigenous political formations, but both were articulated within the idea of the 'region'. It is like the audience watching the Kathakali performance at temple festivals in Kerala. The cognoscenti understand the intricate grammar being telegraphed by the hands and the muscle movements of the face. Many come there to hear the drumming and singing. They are all watching the same performance: some incorporated within the historical time of the story, some within the time of the *manodharma* of the performer and yet others within the metrical cadence of the drum.

As has generally been argued, the Hindi film is not about a plotline and inexorable movement towards a climax alone. As Woody Allen once said, narratives are about a beginning, middle and end but not necessarily in that order. One could go further and say that the Hindi film is like the 'undivided Hindu family': dialogues, lyrics, plot, music, acting, all living

together separately, as it were. And, while the occasional *Devdas* may go overboard in a celebration of visual excess, films are not necessarily characterized by a visuality, a brilliance of camera-work or images.

**T**he material basis for this division of labour within which the components are kept firmly apart has sometimes been explained in terms of a pre-capitalist economy and a putting-out system as it were. But if we keep in mind that the time of the film is not linear and not based on a reality outside of it, then it is precisely the concatenation of these various elements which can be seen as constitutive of the Hindi film genre. These features need explanation only if the peculiarity is seen in terms of deviation from a Hollywood norm.

And so to *Bhagat Singh*, or rather the several *avatars* which beset our screens at one go, with both toy-boy Bobby Deol and brooding action hero Ajay Devgan essaying the nationalist Abhimanyu. These were presented as historical films with members of Bhagat Singh's family testifying for and against the veracity of details and the research teams of both the films relating the lengths to which they went to ensure accuracy. And as one French wit is supposed to have said, comparing translations to mistresses, the faithful ones were not attractive and vice versa. The Devgan version attempted to stay close to a version of historical reality, and like the other versions bombed at the box office. But here is where we return to the aesthetics of the Hindi film again. The question of fact is not so much related to the question of veridicality or truth but to the issue of memory.

History in the Hindi film is about remembering, a comment on reality, and not about verisimilitude: hence the outstanding success of *Mughal-*

*e-Azam*, arguably the finest 'historical' film made on the Hindi screen. And Akbar became 'real' through the overblown portrayal by Prithviraj Kapoor. The Mughal Empire and its vicissitudes were recast within the frame of the Hindi film: in which Dilip Kumar and Madhubala *aka* Salim and Anarkali lived within the space of a song by Bade Ghulam Ali Khan. What was shown was the past as it was to be remembered not the past as it was. *Bhagat Singh* flirted too much with the historical fact; Gandhi (and in a characteristic move, the actor played Kingsley than Gandhi), Irwin and others came with walk on parts and accents to match. This was a history lesson with songs, not a Hindi film. And it satisfied neither historians, with their affliction of 'fact' nor the viewers with their abundance of memories.

**Y**et, as with the conventions of the Hindi film, there were the distinct spheres. The space of the song belonged to the historical Bhagat Singh and his lyrics including *Rang de basanti chola*, and *Pagdi sambhal jatta*, drawing upon the memory of both folklore and the earlier Manoj Kumar version, *Shaheed*. The dialogues reflected the contemporary rendition of nationalist politics as the great 'betrayal' by Gandhi. The plot attempted to present a tragedy of youth plucked in its prime and even included a love angle so that the drama of Bhagat Singh's virginal death could be heightened. And the trajectory was framed by the question What if? What if Gandhi had negotiated with Irwin for Bhagat Singh's release? With this we are back in the realm of history leaving behind the space of the Hindi film. And as we know, the Hindi film abhors the kiss and reality as nature abhors a vacuum.

# The small community of love

VEENA DAS

THIS paper presents the sketch of an argument about what it means to think of a biography of the nation on the register of popular film. This is hardly a new subject but I want to try a different angle from which to ask this question. In effect, I wish to consider some popular remakes of a Hollywood movie and ask what it means to 'remake' something, especially a film? By definition, remaking must have the temporality of 'after' – but does this repetition of an earlier theme in a different context make the dis-

course of such a film derivative? Finally, how should we understand the very notion of context in cinematic language?

The Hollywood film I wish to consider is Frank Capra's *It Happened One Night* (1934) – and the Hindi remakes are *Chori Chori* (1956), *Nau Do Gyarah* (1957) and *Dil Hai ki Manta Nahin* (1996). While *Chori Chori* and *Dil Hai ki Manta Nahin* are obviously remakes – they follow the original plot, sequencing of events and even the dialogue closely. *Nau*



*Do Gyarah* cannot be considered a remake in any strict terms. It follows a different plot line, but nevertheless establishes a connection to the other two films by the insertion of motifs that act as quotation marks and thus shares the temporality of the after.

*It Happened One Night* is the story of a rich girl who contracts a marriage with a playboy against her father's wish. She runs away from her father and tries to make her way to her husband, but on the way meets a journalist who agrees to help her evade her father and get to her husband, though he thinks poorly of her choice. In return, he asks for the exclusive right over her story. On the way, they have to stage a charade of marriage, most notably in an auto camp cabin where they have to spend the night. It is as part of the journey that they discover their love for each other, and after some misunderstandings, are united.

**M**ore important than the plot of the story are the fragments that bear significant symbolic weight—for instance, the blanket hung between his side of the room and hers and how it finally falls. Or the repeated motif of her refusal to eat food—first in the opening scene when she is confined on her father's ship and later her refusal to eat a raw carrot when she is hungry and they are out of money. Her accepting the carrot as they ride in the motor at a later stage, has significance beyond the obvious Freudian symbolism of the carrot as a phallus like object. She learns the lesson of humility but he too learns that simply being poor is not a guarantee that one can recognize one's desire.

The theme of rich girl-poor boy, and of a journey in which they learn what it is to inhabit the world together is a standard theme in much of Hollywood cinema. I find that the question

of how it is that they can come to a shared place from which to view their relation is nicely presented through the medium of the dividing blanket. This is also an obvious allegory for the cinematic screen; it tells us how we, as audience, are implicated in this story.

The philosopher Stanley Cavell, saw *It Happened One Night* as inaugurating the genre of films he called the comedy of remarriage.<sup>1</sup> These movies, he argued, were the inheritors of preoccupations and discoveries of Shakespearean romantic comedy. As I understand Cavell's argument, the character of this genre is determined by a certain question they ask about what it is to replace a past—seen as settled place—with a commitment to the future defined simply as the adventurousness of being together.

The plot, as in most romantic comedies, revolves around a couple—a man and a woman and the obstacles in their search for each other. In such a story of search for love, Old Comedy typically places the weight on the heroine who, sometimes disguised as a boy, must pass through something like death and restoration as a key to the successful resolution of the plot. In New Comedy, on the other hand, it is the young man who must struggle to overcome the obstacles posed by an older man to win the heroine and find individual and social reconciliation.

**A**s Cavell notes, the comedy of remarriage seems to transgress one important feature—for the heroine in these genres is cast as already married and the thrust of the plot is that the central pair must be married *again*—so something like a divorce is also part of the story. It is Cavell's take that in these movies, some place other than

the normal or the habitual has to be found as providing the perspective on what it is to be married. Though not stated explicitly, the title of his book, *Pursuits of Happiness*, directs our attention to the American Constitution: it suggests that the reconfiguring of what it is to be a man or a woman, and what it is to be married, are somehow implicated in the question of what is the moral stake in America at this juncture.

**W**hat is at stake is something Cavell discovers in his careful reading of the films through the symbols of the ordinary—in the case of *It Happened One Night*, it is by reflecting on the blanket or the carrot. Moments such as the ones in which Clark Gable shows a maternal side—bringing a tooth brush for Colbert, surprising her by ironing her clothes while she is asleep, and teaching her how to dunk doughnuts in coffee.

Something like a conclusion might read as follows. Clark Gable stages the telling of the story of this rich girl as that through which he would divorce her from her past but discovers that this story cannot be told as to a public—it has to be said to her in private. One cannot base the little community of love on an appeal to law—you cannot wait, as Cavell says, for the *perfect* larger community before you form the smaller communities of love.

Thus the constitutional promise, about life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness has the public face of what it is to claim this in law and the private face of what it is to ask that human society contain the room for these small communities to be built. Is the remaking of this film in the Indian register similar/different? If we understand translation as that which is not purely an importation of meaning from one language to another, but also a fullness

1. Stanley Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage*, Cambridge, MA., Harvard University Press, 1981:

that may come from the other in whose medium now we are forced to think, then; can the Hindi popular film bear the weight of this conception? Let us see.

In the original movie the barrier scene had some biblical underpinnings, as for instance, in the reference Clark Gable makes to the blanket that divides his space from hers as the 'Walls of Jericho'. So when he asks her mockingly to move herself to the side of the Israelites, we understand him as saying that the invitation to find a correct way of breaking that wall must come from her side. Indeed, we see that the moment of confession of love comes when she crosses over to his side and tells him that they will run away (but they are already on the road, so where and how would this running away be accomplished?).

**C**learly this biblical underpinning is absent in the Hindi remakes – but surely, in 1956, the idea of partitioning a space when you are on the road could not have been completely innocent of the idea of the larger and more traumatic partition that the country had undergone? Is the separation and privacy that Raj Kapoor offers in hanging up the sheet dividing their rooms an allegory of how the space of the private is to be reconstructed?

Let us recall that in running away from home, defined by the presence of a loving but domineering father, Nargis has to learn what it is to come to terms with her own desire (a theme common with *It Happened...*) but also what it is to learn to inhabit this space that is India? This is signalled first from the way that her running away is also an entry into the space defined as 'Indian'. She is shown eating in a 'Madrasi' eating place with a Brahmin looking cook serving her; she goes into a shop to buy a *sari* – while in the first few scenes in

her father's ship she is wearing a pair of black Jodhpurs and a tucked in shirt, marking her as wearing western dress. The film wittily suggests that wearing a sari would be an effective disguise for her!

This theme of her learning to become Indian is again marked by her learning to recognize food that is Indian. Thus when hungry and without much money, she buys a roasted *bhutta*, and then says with a glimmer of recognition, 'Oh corn – you can make into soup, or cake, or pudding.' Only towards the end when she returns to her father's house, convinced that Raj Kapoor has abandoned her because of his contempt for her, does she find that this 'Indian' food is all she can bear to eat. By now, her father has yielded to what he imagines is her desire. But all she can say is, 'How good were those days, when a girl left her home only twice – once when she got married and the second time when she was taken for her funeral.'

This strict code of female chastity within which she imagines that tradition can provide security of being Indian is already like a memory – a feeling of pastness pervades this sentence.

**W**hat is then imagined as the journey through which this woman will learn how to be an Indian, and how to be a new woman who can recognize her desire? I note that the person she first proclaimed to love, even willing to defy her father for him, is a pilot – and as the father says to the reporters after the marriage with him is announced – a pilot can take her to the world of stars. Later, in *Dil Hai ki Manta Nahin*, this person is a film star – both offer an escape.<sup>2</sup> Indeed the journey is the site on which she will have to learn that the little community of love is to be made within an imperfect larger community rather than by

escaping to some perfect world made up of stars.

**A**n important feature of the genre of remarriage as described by Cavell is that there is considerable confusion as to how the roles of being active and passive are to be distributed between men and women, between the paternal and the maternal. *Chori Chori* expresses this confusion between the active and the passive as a sign of the modern. The characters of *It Happened One Night*, against whose threats Clark Gable protects Colbert, are replaced by couples and each couple has an aggressive female figure and an effeminate man trying to prove his masculinity but getting defeated. With these couples surrounding our protagonists, the manner in which Raj Kapoor expresses his masculinity is a mixture of the paternal and the maternal. In *Dil Hai ki Manta Nahin*, Aamir Khan has completely shed this suggestion of the paternal or the maternal. Though the scenes in which he brings her breakfast are similar to *Chori Chori*, his style is that of a boy next door who is nevertheless capable of fighting off the mafia – enacted in a scene in which he rescues her.

Thus the education of a woman, and hence her creation, is seen in these movies as in the original, to be a matter concerning men. The heroine is never shown in the orbit of another woman such as a mother – but is this a matter of only educating the woman? I find it important that in each case there is also the question of whether she can accept this education from *this* man?

I offer only two comments here. The first is that the man is able to relate

2. In neither film is the theme of 'remarriage' to be taken literally but this does not alter the cinematic expression of divorce for in all these films the moment of renunciation of that wild dream is to be enacted forcefully as in the girl running away from the wedding *mandap*.

to the larger community – but does not know what it is to be forming the smaller community of love. And she cannot accept his education until he learns to recognize this. For instance, in *Chori Chori*, Nargis begins to call Raj Kapoor ‘Mr Insaniyat’ – and at one point when he does not respond to her, she says, ‘You can think of the whole of humanity but you cannot respond to the one next to you?’ Aamir Khan’s playful teasing of Pooja Bhatt as ‘Aye, Miss India’ – inserts that distance that he will have to learn to traverse.

**T**he second point is that after her confession of love when the woman has crossed from her side of the sheet that divides them, in order to declare her love for him – he is indifferent, or scared, or in another world. Earlier the man had admonished the woman by saying that he cannot understand what rich people like her want. And now she replies, ‘But do you know what you want?’ From her perspective, she was declaring her love after she had heard him speak of the kind of woman he would want to marry – but he seems incapable of recognizing her as *that woman*. Perhaps his vision has put him in a trance?

Third, there is the entire sequence in which Raj Kapoor/Aamir Khan, leaves her sleeping to get money from the editor of his newspaper, since he now has the woman’s story – and comes back to discover that she is gone. He will not find out until much later that she was thrown out but we could ask – could this mean that her story if told publicly, is not a story of their love? That, he wins her in the end because he went to settle accounts with her father – overtly this is about the film’s testifying to the father that he was not after the reward money and hence loved her. But I also take it as allegorical that a settling of accounts must happen on the small register of

everyday transactions. The dividing screen between them finally falls because they have both learnt to inhabit this world as the world of their desire.

If my reading of these two remakes is anywhere in the right direction, then I claim that the popular film provides a very different take on what it was to be making masculinity and femininity in the new nation. Far from the interior being a space in which tradition lived through the medium of women promising an authentic self to the alienated masculine subject, the excitement of the new nation was to lie in a journey in which room was to be made for the sphere of the private, small communities. I suspect, though, that if the theme of the partition in the charade of marriage bore even a faint relation to the theme of Partition, then the film does not offer us any thought on how that particular dividing blanket was to fall.

**I** will offer a few brief reflections on why *Nau Do Gyarah* might be seen as belonging to the same genre of films though its plot line is quite different. In this Devanand-Kalpna Kartik film, the protagonist (also a journalist) discovers that he has inherited nine and two – i.e. eleven lakhs from an uncle.<sup>3</sup> At about the same time Kalpna Kartik discovers that her groom has asked for more money in dowry and she rebels by disguising herself as a man and running away. She is hiding in Dev Anand’s truck, headed for an unknown journey, when he discovers her. Both proceed to play the charade of marriage by taking a job as a married couple in the household that had appropriated his inheritance, discover their love for each other, and

3. The reference to *Nau Do Gyarah*, as absconding helps to think of this film as belonging to the search for a different place – although it is the man who inherits the nine and two making eleven, it is the woman who is absconding.

after some heroic fighting Dev Anand saves her from the clutches of her evil fiancé, reclaims his inheritance and presumably get married.

**W**hat I find interesting in the movie is that though made just one year after *Chori Chori*, the hero has already become the macho man who must save the heroine. The theme of ‘educating and creating’ the woman becomes more of saving her from the wicked world, and the mix of paternal and maternal care in the making of a conjugal couple shifts the maternal functions typically on the woman.<sup>4</sup> Yet the motif of the journey, the charade of marriage and insertion of such memorable moments as the woman saying ‘I am hungry’ as a confession of her need for him – these moments put the earlier films as ‘quotes’ within this film.

I find it intriguing too that in *Dil Hai ki Manta Nahin*, the first tender moment between Aamir Khan and Pooja Bhatt happens when they get lost in the tune of *Hum Hain Rahi Pyar Ke* – the signature tune of *Nau Do Gyarah*. This explicit creation by the film of a past for itself vastly complicates questions of what it is to be in context and out of context. I think there is an interesting murmur of conversations here that may be worthy of remembrance. It points to a time when we were willing to be educated by each other.

In a conference I attended recently, someone asked if a song like ‘*Tu Hindu banega na Musalman banega – Insaan ki aulad hai insaan banega*’ from *Dhul ka Phul* was still possible. I thought of Mr Insaniyat and how he learnt that the claims of building small communities of love was also a way of learning to be Indian.

4. Thus it is the woman who makes and offers tea to the man as a sign of care.

# Conceptualizing law and culture

LAWRENCE LIANG

WHAT place does a legal article have in a *Seminar* special issue on film cultures? Implicit in this question is a set of assumptions of what constitutes fields of theory and practice. The aim of this short piece will be to question the classical boundaries drawn by disciplines like law which aim to portray themselves as autonomous bodies of knowledge untouched by developments in areas like cultural studies. It also seeks to question the premise that cultural studies make when it seeks to study either cultural artifacts or cultural phenomena, and argue for the need for a stronger critical interrogation of legal practices as sites of cultural practice.

While it may have come a little late, interdisciplinary methodology has certainly arrived as far as legal studies is concerned. Beginning with the sociological school of jurisprudence there has been a concerted interest in the idea of the role that law plays in society, and its relationship to the various contested processes which we call culture. One of the limitations that the law and society school had in conceptualizing this relationship between law and culture was that it saw law and culture as being two autonomous disciplines which were nonetheless linked

to each other. Thus we had the popular theory of law being a reflection of the prevailing cultural and moral norms in society, and scholarship in the area attempted to unravel the mysterious processes through which the two were inter-connected.

Such an understanding of law and culture, however, assumed the relative stability of both law and culture. Thus when law and culture were thought of together, they were conceptualized as distinct realms of action which were only marginally related to one another. For example, we would tend to think of watching a film as a cultural act with little or no significant legal implication. We would also assume that a lawsuit challenging certain scenes in a film is largely a legal problem with few cultural implications.

In India for instance, the work of Upendra Baxi and Rajeev Dhavan has emerged from the bedrock of the law and society movement. The limitations of this work lies in their reliance upon the high culture of the law, in the form of appellate judgments, the rule of law, alternate legalities, and so on, where they recognize the instrumental relationship that law has with society and social change itself.

Cultural analysis has since moved beyond its stable accounts and has come to include a wide array of activities and strategies which people deploy in the process of meaning making. Developments in legal studies have also come to recognize that law and the idea of legality may be just one of the various processes through which people make sense of themselves and their role in society.

If there is one common concern that clearly articulates the desire for studying law and culture, it is a recognition that the traditional boundaries drawn by disciplines do not necessarily offer the most intelligible accounts of society. What then is the role of an interdisciplinary enquiry? A mere recognition of the importance of interdisciplinarity by itself does not really say anything interesting. We have to be clear about the role that such an enquiry has.

**W**hat does it mean for legal studies to adopt cultural analysis and/or cultural studies? In what way will a cultural study of law enlarge and alter our conception of the way law operates in our identities, interpretations, and imaginings? Is it worthwhile to use the intellectual strategies and methodology of cultural analysis for the analysis of legal phenomena?

Rosemary Coombe argues that 'an exploration of the nexus of law and culture will not be fruitful unless it can transcend and transform its initial categories. A continuous mutual disruption – the undoing of one term by the other – may be a more productive figuration than the image of relationship or joiner.' It is therefore important to see the goal of this interdisciplinary project as one which attempts to understand law not in relationship to culture as if they were two discrete realms of action and discourse, but to make sense of law as culture and culture as law, and to begin

to think about how to talk about and interpret law in cultural terms.

Thus to go back to our previous example, our understandings of the film and the lawsuit are impoverished when we fail to account for the ways in which the film is a product of law and the lawsuit a product of culture, and how the meaning of each is bound up in the other, and in the complex entanglement of law and culture.

**W**hat then are some of the ways in which we see the relationship between legality and the idea of culture?

\* Constitutive theories of law, for instance, have been important in revealing the close relation that law has to power within the linguistic field in which law functions. That is, law does not merely describe or reflect a set of circumstances in society but through such description actually creates or constitutes that sphere which we call the cultural. A clear instance of this is Sec. 377 of the IPC which criminalizes 'unnatural sexual offences'. The figure of the homosexual as a deviant of the law therefore gets constituted by the operation of Sec. 377.

\* If culture can be broadly defined as various practices of signification, then a cultural analysis of law is crucial in helping us understand 'the signifying power of law and law's power over signification.' It forces us to recognize that legal meaning may be found and invented in the variety of locations and practices that constitute culture. Furthermore, these locations and practices may themselves be encapsulated, though always incompletely, in legal forms, regulations and symbols (Rosemary Coombe). There may, therefore, be a rich project in uncovering the cultural and narrative life of the law as it were, in the various day to day situations in which people encounter and deal with notions of law and legality.

\* Law continues to play a large role in regulating the terms and conditions of cultural production and cultural practices. Cultural artifacts on the other hand have revelled in representing issues of law and legality. While there have been attempts at studying these instances of the relationship between law and legality, they have largely concentrated on the cultural representations as metaphors of legality. It is important however to move beyond the metaphor of legality analysis into understanding how the conditions for the circulation of such cultural practices are themselves instances of legality. A prominent example in this instance is the idea of authorship and originality itself as legally mediated categories.

**I**n the rest of the paper I shall try to provide an account of a recent instance of the interaction between law and film cultures. The incident in question revolves around a claim or an attempt made by Rajnikant to protect a sign that he uses in his film *Baba*. I use the incident to pose larger questions of what it means to understand the language of legality as it is mediated through processes of cultural consumption. While there is uncertainty about the manner and mode of protection that he sought, there was some fanfare and media publicity claiming that Rajnikant was attempting to copyright and trademark the sign he uses in the film.

This attempt to formally protect the gesture spawned a furious debate around what it was that he was attempting. The authorship claims being made by him around his persona problematised in a significant manner the very question of what it means to be a star, or what it means to protect one's stardom. (See for instance the debates in the commons-law list at [www.sarai.net](http://www.sarai.net)):

'Clint Eastwood doesn't want the tabloids to write about him. Rudolf Valentino's heirs want to control his film biography. The Girl Scouts don't want their image soiled by association with certain activities. George Lucas wants to keep Strategic Defense Initiative fans from calling it "Star Wars". Pepsico doesn't want singers to use the word "Pepsi" in their songs. Guy Lombardo wants an exclusive property right to ads that show big bands playing on New Year's Eve. Uri Geller thinks he should be paid for ads showing psychics bending metal through telekinesis. Paul Prudhomme, that household name, thinks the same about ads featuring corpulent bearded chefs. And scads of copyright holders see purple when their creations are made fun of. Something very dangerous is going on here.' – Judge Alex Kozinski, Dissenting judgment in *White v. Samsung Elecs. Am., Inc.*, 989 F.2d 1512, 1512-13 (9th Cir. 1993).

It is important to distinguish and clarify some of the issues with respect to the right to publicity and the manner in which it has been used in popular culture debates. The right to publicity is a common law right which accrues to the individual persona of the celebrity. It does not preclude any claim of protection over the work from copyright or allied laws. It must be stated that the right to publicity has a long history in Hollywood and all kinds of claims have been made by actors about their rights. In India, Rajnikant's claim was perhaps the first public claim towards such a right to publicity.

In common law, the right to publicity then is a right to certain distinguishing and identifying characteristics, features or behaviour of a celebrity. These rights are assignable and tradable. Some notable illustrations include: (i) Johnny Carson invoked his

right of publicity to stop a small-time manufacturer from marketing a line of 'Here's Johnny' portable toilets. *Carson v. Here's Johnny Portable Toilets, Inc.* 698 F.2d 831 (6th Cir. 1983). (ii) Martin Luther King's family may have no legal remedy against the revelation that the slain civil rights leader 'engaged in extramarital sexual encounters on the last night of his life.' But King's family, having inherited his right of publicity, can stop the marketing of an inexpensive plastic bust. *Martin Luther King, Jr., Ctr. for Social Change, Inc. v. American Heritage Prods., Inc.*, 296 S.E.2d 697 (Ga. 1982).

So on the one hand you have a range of these familiar cultural artifacts, the relics of popular culture, and on the other hand these are also the subject of intense dispute about property and ownership claims. James Gaines, having a look at one of the classical legal works, *Nimmers Companion to Entertainment Law*, says, 'Nimmer cases and materials on copyright law and entertainment law is an alternative history of the film industry. For instance, *Gaslight* is important not only as a canonical film melodrama but as the object of a radio parody. The *Maltese Falcon* is the centre of dispute over serial rights; and Warner Brothers *Dark Passage*, which later became the television serial, figures in the definitive case on the "indivisibility of copyright". Reading Nimmer's cases and materials is an uncanny experience for the historian of American film.'

The greatest achievement of cultural studies has been about the articulation of popular culture as a contested terrain in which different subjects (racial, caste, gender, class, sexuality) struggle, albeit on unequal terms, to make and establish their own meanings and identities. The consumption of

cultural commodities (movies, songs, fashion, television programmes) is therefore seen neither as uniformly received nor uncritically accepted and while there may have been 'preferred meanings' generated and circulated by the culture industry, these meanings were often recoded and often subverted in contextual circumstances.

What then happens when these various contestations over meaning get encoded as acts of deviance through the operation of some form of legality? How for instance does intellectual property laws and more particularly in this case, the right to publicity function to limit such circulation of meaning? Does it facilitate a process through which the manufacturers of culture retain a stronghold over the possibilities of circulation or does it allow for usages which may be more democratically conceptualized?

It is clear that intellectual property laws have the ability to privatize a number of our culture's basic semiotic and symbolic resources and take them out of the public domain. See for instance, *San Francisco Arts & Athletics Inc. v. United States Olympic Comm.*, 483 U.S. 522 (1987), a US Supreme Court case which held that the United States Olympic Committee had the right to prohibit a nonprofit gay rights organization from using the word 'Olympic' in conjunction with the word gay.

It is important however to note that it is not as if the manufacturers of these artifacts don't want their products to enter into the realm of popular culture. On the contrary it is crucial that they become a part of the daily vocabulary of the pope or the audience. Thus, it is not as if Rajnikant does not want his sign to be used by his 'fans' or audience but by obtaining or claiming rights against the sign,

he acquires the absolute right to determine the ways in which this sign may be used or control the ways in which it may be misused.

In the present context, the immediate motivation for Rajnikant may be mixed. From an attempt to control a particular image as a move before his entry into politics or even the emergence of his self-awareness as being a global product, his claim however gets mediated through the use of the language of intellectual property. Inherent then in the right to publicity protection, is this rather quaint notion of the pristine image that is sought to be protected.

The point is not to deny that Rajnikant has a signature style or as Ashish Rajadhyaksha says, 'This style, as you know, involves an entire distinct ensemble, including a particular style of camerawork, editing, sound, and even special effects, that is clearly inscribed into the very textual fabric of the film, appears in film after film.' The style also emerges when a number of people emulate this style, either in reverence or in jest. The style also emerges when it is used by Rajni clones, mimics or incorporated into *the very textual fabric of other films*.

**W**hat then is the precondition to the stars claiming an exclusive right to their image, a right which is articulated through a language of exceptions. Richard Dyer has written at some length about the use and appropriation of the image of Judy Garland by urban gay men as a powerful means of speaking to each other about themselves. Or in the same vein the use of James Dean by contemporary lesbians. So what happens when these stars or their estates do not agree with particular appropriations or uses?

In an interesting case, a small group brought out a card bearing a

picture of John Wayne, wearing a cowboy hat and bright red lipstick, with a caption, 'It's such a bitch being butch.' Wayne's children, among others, objected to the card not only on the ground that its sellers were making money from The Duke's image – money that should go to them, but also that the card was 'tasteless' and demeaned their father's (hard-earned) conservative macho image.

**A**s Michael Madow notes: 'Publicity rights are about meaning as well as money. The question "Who owns Madonna?" is not just a question about who gets to capture the immense economic values that attach to her persona. The question is also, even chiefly, about who gets to decide what "Madonna" will mean in our culture: what meaning(s) her image will be used to generate and circulate, and what meaning(s) she will have for us. By centralizing this meaning-making power in the celebrity herself or her assignees, the right of publicity facilitates top-down management of popular culture and constricts the space available for alternative and oppositional cultural practice. This is perhaps not reason enough to reject the right of publicity tout court. But it does place a heavy burden of justification on the proponents of the right.'

The emergence of the right to publicity as a distinct right within the larger genus of intellectual property rights has a relatively recent history. But this should be distinguished from the fact that the right of publicity is a new right for a new 'wrong'. Large-scale commercial exploitation of famous persons goes back to at least the 18th century. It continued throughout the 19th century as well, without it having to be a problem to be regulated by law. If at all, the practice seems to have been supported by a widely shared conception of famous persons

as a kind of communal property, freely available for commercial as well as cultural exploitation.

**F**or instance, after Benjamin Franklin's arrival as ambassador to France, Franklin's likeness began to appear 'on medallions, snuffboxes, rings, clocks, vases, handkerchiefs, and pocket knives.' During Sarah Bernhardt's 1880 American tour, manufacturers and merchants 'cashed in with Sarah Bernhardt perfume, candy, cigars, and eyeglasses.' Two years later, when Oscar Wilde visited the United States on a much publicized and controversial lecture tour, advertisers put his image on trade cards for such products as Marie Fontaine's Mouth and Freckle Cure. So when does the change start occurring?

The first change occurs between the end of the Civil War and 1900; total expenditures on advertising soared, multiplying tenfold and transforming the American landscape in the process. In urban centres, 'every available building and public conveyance was plastered with some sort of commercial message,' even as 'enterprising advertisers easily convinced rural inhabitants to have the same thing done to their roadside farm buildings.'

Second, a shift in advertising content. Previously, advertising had mostly been word-based, usually presenting consumers with a 'reason' why they should select the particular product. In the late 19th century, however, the perfection of chromolithography made possible a new kind of visual (i.e., image-based) advertising.

Third, an increase in daily newspaper circulation from 2.6 million in 1870 to 8.4 million in 1890.

And fourth, the emergence of the film industry and the star system (well documented) which begins to cast the right as a natural right for a



celebrity, now defined as a person known for his well-knownness.

**T**he question of what a star is has been answered at some length in film theory, but what happens when the star also emerges as an encoded figure produced by the operation of certain legal mechanisms? How does film theory account for this new domain that allows for certain characteristics of stardom or celebrityhood to emerge? How, for instance, do you deal with a star who uses the legal value of his celebrity status to prohibit certain forms of appropriation? For instance, in *Woody Allen v. National Video, Inc.*, 610 F. Supp. 612 (S.D.N.Y. 1985), Allen claimed that a video store had used his likeness without his permission. In deciding for Allen, the court essentially deemed that another individual had violated a celebrity's rights simply because he physically resembled the celebrity and appeared in an advertisement.

Madow states that, 'A celebrity does not make her public image, her meaning for others, in anything like the way a carpenter makes a chair from a block of wood. She is not the sole and sovereign "author" of what she means for others. Contingency cannot be entirely erased. The creative (and autonomous) role of the media and the audience in the meaning-making process cannot be excised. To be sure, the precise distribution of semiotic power will vary from case to case, as will the part played by luck and politics. Sometimes, the celebrity herself or persons in her pay seem to perform the lion's share of the meaning making work; at other times, the work is left to experts in the celebrity industry, for whom the celebrity is little more than "raw material" to be "mined and worked up into" a saleable commodity.'

'Sometimes, the meaning the celebrity (or her sponsors) initially

selects and circulates largely resists displacement; at other times, this "preferred meaning" is inflected, subverted, or inverted, either in the culture at large or in a particular subculture, as the celebrity's fans weave their own narratives and create their own fantasies about her. But despite these variations, a celebrity's public image is always the product of a complex social, if not fully democratic, process in which the "labour" (time, money, effort) of the celebrity herself (and of the celebrity industry, too) is but one ingredient, and not always the main one.'

**I**f all celebrities have a natural right to their persona, then what happens to Madonna. John Fiske asks of Madonna, whose entire persona is an ironic reworking of the Hollywood myth of 'the blonde', how much she owed to Marlene Dietrich, Marilyn Monroe? To the directors (Hawks, Huston, Mankiewicz, Wilder) who made the films in which Monroe appeared? To Andy Warhol and the Kennedy brothers, who helped elevate her to icon status? Similarly, what is one to make of the fact that every one of Subhash Ghai's leading actors have in some ways been clones of Dev Anand.

These are just the tentative beginnings towards a critical move that seeks to interrogate culture legally. As a domain of cultural politics, intellectual property serves as a fertile ground to explore the prospects for an interdisciplinary practice that draws from ethnography, cultural studies, as well as law and society scholarship. The obvious failure of the traditional positivist, formalist and even the classical critical legal studies mode opens up opportunities to explore law as a more diffused force shaping social consciousness and behaviour.



# A life in the theatre

**Bhrigupati Singh:** *When did you become the manager here at Jagat Cinema?*

**Bal Kishen Malhotra:** In 1970, I was the gatekeeper. In 1980, I was promoted to booking clerk. From there I became the assistant manager, then the manager, and then the assistant general manager. But believe me, in a private job, the manager and the chaprasi are in exactly the same position. When the owner feels that he has outlived his usefulness he gets rid of him. They kick him out. [...]

I played the lead role in a play once, in Srinagar in 1961, at the 5th All India Police Function. Balraj Sahni and Mohammed Rafi were there. Sheikh Abdullah was the chief guest. I was born in 1945 so I was 16 years old at the time. After the climax of the show Balraj Sahni

came up on stage. He hugged me and told me that I would be as big a star as him. Fortunately, or unfortunately, that was the turning point in my life. Some years later in 1967 I was doing another play, *Naya Zamana*, which I directed. We performed at the Delhi Public Library. J.C. Sharma, the noted film producer was in the audience. After the play was over he invited me to Bombay to join his team. Like me, he was a native of Shahadra in Delhi. He had just announced a new picture called *Surag*... Many letters came and he called people for auditions in batches and collected money from them. This turned out to be a hoax, he was actually collecting money for the release of 'Maharani Padmini' which turned out to be his last film. After this I did some freelancing through contacts I had made while working

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\* This article is in two sections. The first section is a synthesis of four interviews conducted over a period of about six months with Bal Kishen Malhotra in his office at Jagat Cinema. The interviews were originally in Hindi (with occasional smatterings of English). Unfortunately, the translation loses much of the poetry, the drama and the anguish of the Hindi version. From October 2001 until August 2002, I was part of the Publics & Practices in the History of the Present (PPHP) Project, located at Sarai-CSDS (Centre for the Study of Developing Societies), Delhi. This is an interdisciplinary social science research project conceptualized by Ravi Vasudevan, Ravi Sundaram and the Raqs Media Collective. These interviews were done as part of that project. The project maintains an archival 'diary' where the various people involved email each other field reports and discuss ideas and possible

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research openings. These email notes can be collaborative, combative, functional and short, or long and subjective, depending on the nature of the exchange. The second part of this article is a field note from late April 2002, sent to the PPHP mailing list, written after I had been visiting Jagat Cinema once a week for roughly six months. Jagat Cinema is named after Seth Jagat Narain, who bought the hall from B.N. Sircar of New Theatres (Calcutta) in 1937. The hall is presently run by his sons. My interest throughout this piece is far less in the 'facts' of the matter and much more in how a person or a place might present itself as an object of memory. I offer this two part conjunction without interpretation and explanation so as to leave it somewhat open, since it is part of a broader work in progress. *A Life in the Theatre* is a play by David Mamet, a tragicomic dialogue between an older and a younger actor.

with him. Unfortunately, I didn't find a godfather and in Bombay that is absolutely necessary.

Then in 1968, a tragedy took place in my life. My mother, who worked in the police, died in an accident. At this point of time my father worked here in Jagat Cinema. My mamaji got me a permanent job in the railways but I didn't take it because I met another man who invited me to Bombay. Today the fellow who took up the railways job earns Rs 24000 a month. I was even offered a job in the police in place of my mother but I didn't take it because I pictured myself in a police uniform, and I am short, so I thought I would look comic. Instead I went to Bombay. *Filmi bhoot savaar tha na!* [I was obsessed with films]. This time I spent two years there. After a while I wasn't even being able to scrape together enough money for a decent meal so I came back to Delhi. I met Seth Jagat Narain's son *aur unke aage peeche ghoomne laga*, hoping he would give me a job. Then, in June 1970 I was appointed at Ritz Cinema as a gatekeeper. [...]

**BS:** *When did you get involved with the cinema worker's union?*

**BK:** In 1979. At the time there was a union by the name of Cine-employees Association. On 9 and 10 February 1979, they announced a city-wide strike in Delhi. That strike failed. In that strike the union leader was one Kharod Bhattacharya. Management *se milke*, he agreed to their terms and conditions. After that the workers became dissatisfied. They decided to join together and start a new union. The idea was that the general secretary of a cinema-workers union should be a cinema worker himself so that we don't have to explain everything to him. We wouldn't have to tell him how the management harasses us and so on.

There was one Jeevan Kapoor who used to be a gatekeeper at Rivoli Cinema in Connaught Place. He came to meet me. In 1979 I used to work at Ritz Cinema [near ISBT, Delhi] and I had participated with great enthusiasm in the February strike. As a result I was transferred shortly afterwards here, to Jagat. Jeevan Kapoor went to Ritz looking for me. There they told him about my transfer, so he came to Jagat. He told me that he had been going to all the cinemas in Delhi and trying to unite the workers. He said that they were organizing a meeting and he invited me to come. The space occupied today by the Shivaji bus terminal in front of Rivoli used to be a park in those days. The meeting was in that park. Roughly about three or four hundred workers from Delhi collected there.

**BS:** *All cinema workers?*

**BK:** Yes. We decided to form a new union and choose a general secretary from among ourselves. The understanding was that all the posts should be held by cinema workers. The meeting went on for a couple of days. At the end of that meeting Jeevan Kapoor Saab was chosen as the president and I was appointed as the general secretary. We presented our new charter to the cinema owners but they didn't even bother to look at it. They weren't even ready to talk to us. We held a number of demonstrations. Two cinema owners, the owner of Chanakya and the owner of Delite, were ready to make an agreement with us, which they did.

But we were workers, not advocates. We had no idea that after making out an agreement you needed to get it registered. We were celebrating the victory; we thought we had won our battle. Within three days we received summons from the court carrying charges against us that we had pressurized the cinema owners into signing the agreements. Both cinemas were owned as partnerships, so the ones who hadn't signed registered cases against us and claimed that the signatories didn't even have the authority to sign such an agreement! The agreements were declared invalid.

After that *hume junoon savaar ho gaya*. I decided that we had to do something about this. I started studying the law. We decided to fight this on the largest scale possible. During those days, Chaudhary Charan Singh became the prime minister for a few days. We took a deputation to meet him. We took out a night-time *mashaal juloos* [torchlight rally] which started from Regal Cinema in Connaught Place. At that time the minister for information and broadcasting was Vasant Sathe. We announced a hunger strike at his residence. I sat there on an indefinite hunger strike.

Vasant Sathe himself used to be a trade union leader in Maharashtra, which is how he had come into politics. He had a personal meeting with me. We kept only one demand in front of him, that there should be a separate wage board for the cinema workers. Because we are scattered everywhere, every hall has a different management. The management pressurizes the workers and gets them to work under all sorts of agreements. So we asked for a uniform wage board. He told us that a wage board cannot possibly be formed for one state. Until your union is at an All-India level, you can't do anything.

In our personal meeting Vasant Sathe also told me this: I myself started my political career with the cinema workers. Remember one thing, the cinema workers hold no one dear. You'll stake your life for

them, and they'll remember you for a few days at best. If you call a strike today, no one will land up from the halls that are running new pictures. All of them will be busy trying to earn whatever little money they can, while the film's success lasts. He told me, 'Beta! Run a union for coolies, run a union for rickshawallahs. Don't even try to start a cinema workers union.' Anyway, because I was a cinema worker I didn't pay much attention to his words. I paid attention to the relevant information, namely that we needed to make this an All-India union. Just at that time there was the 1st Audio-Visual Workers Convention in Calcutta for which I got an invitation. I attended that conference and put my thoughts forward. There were people present from various states and they were extremely cooperative. They invited me to their states and asked me to meet them. I started a campaign and went out of Delhi.

Ah! But before that was our October strike! In 1979 our union had begun to pose a serious threat to the cinema owners. So first, they didn't let our union get registered. The other union, the Cine-Employees Association filed a writ saying that we couldn't register under the name Cine-Workers Association. So then we named ourselves the New Cine-Employees Association and got a registration. In those days there was a big-budget film releasing called *Suhaag*, an Amitabh Bachchan starrer. We made that film our target, going to whichever hall it was released at. First Rachna cinema, then Vishaal cinema, then Upahaar cinema and lastly my own Jagat Cinema. We had a peaceful strike for two days.

**BS:** *Why did you choose this film?*

**BK:** It was such a big budget film. We wanted to disrupt the cinema business. Otherwise the owners would never listen to us. For two days we had a peaceful dharna and on the third day we called a strike, only for a day. Barely had we announced this strike... actually our numbers had become much less, the morale was going down. We felt we needed some support, some outside help. In those days there used to be a newly formed Delhi State Workers Coordination Committee in which there were factory workers, class 4 employees from hospitals, and others. We decided to affiliate ourselves with this committee but totally refused to have anything to do with any political party.

After joining that committee, we announced this forthcoming strike, and asked for their help for that day. Our president Jeevan Kapoor and I were in Kalkaji that day. There is a factory there called Jefferson Bolt factory. Their workers were also members of this

committee. We were returning after meeting their workers. It was an absolutely silent road, must have been about 4 or 5 o'clock in the evening. It was winter so it had got quite dark. It was the month of October in 1979. Suddenly, a two wheeler scooter came and stood in front of me. The gentleman driving it got off and asked me, 'Is your name Bal Kishen Malhotra?' I had barely said 'Yes', when the scooter moved and I felt myself collapsing on the ground, head first. Meaning, someone attacked me from behind. I fell on the road. Even before I could get up, I felt blows upon blows. I turned to see who it was but all I saw was a stick coming towards my head. I received a number of hits on my shoulder, a couple of fractures, and the map of India on my back.

I had to stay in Willingdon Hospital for a few days. But I didn't get scared, my resolve was firm. We continued with the strike, starting from Rachna, to Vishaal, to Upahaar and finally ending up at Jagat. The day we were at Jagat, the last day of our strike, I suddenly saw the same man, the one who had stopped on the scooter and verified my name. He was standing next to the owner of my hall! That was it. We went after him. The owners left him standing there. Anyway... we had been working there for so many years, my father also worked here, so we reached a compromise and I withdrew the case I had filed against the owners.

Anyway, taking Vasant Sathe's suggestion seriously, I moved out from Delhi, starting first with U.P., Ghaziabad, Meerut, Kanpur, Lucknow, Banaras, Mughal Sarai, where we made a lot of new members. From U.P. we moved to Haryana, then from there to M.P. Madhya Pradesh is such a big state, the towns are so spread out. In all we enlisted members from four states. Of course, while we were travelling we lived without pay. In those days the union *chanda* was Rs 2 per worker per month. Unfortunately many workers didn't even pay that small an amount. So we became increasingly penniless, virtually living hand to mouth.

Every time we returned from the tour back to Delhi we would obviously be without salary. Our homes were running out of food. The workers wouldn't pay their chanda. Only those whose work was pending would give their share. They would even be willing to pay up to one year's advance fee. But once their work was done, they were nowhere to be seen. So gradually the union dissipated. A union can never work on the basis of a leader. The leader's strength is his backing, the people with him. So that campaign to take this to an all-India level was left incomplete.

A few years later we tried again. New people came forward. Bengal, Maharashtra, Karnataka, these states joined us. We registered ourselves at an all-India level. Today I am the vice president of that all-India union; B.M. Rachappa from Karnataka is the president. But this union exists only on paper. For one, the business for cinema halls is totally over. Since VCRs and cable TV came about the cinema business itself starting going down. Gradually halls started shutting down. In Maharashtra and Karnataka a lot of halls have shut down, also in Tamil Nadu. Now the union barely has any work, maybe now and then some formal agreements and so on, but the energy we had in those days is totally gone.

Almost every day, walking on the street, I see things that make me mad. If I could make a film, I would express that. A writer expresses himself with his pen; a film person expresses himself through cinema. I, for one, cannot express myself through any medium. It's like being strangulated, as I file these sheets every day.



Dear All,

Since I began posting to PPHP, I have always posted in a realist, knowledge-building, analytical mode. Today I had an unsettling experience in my most familiar field site, for which reason I post this most subjective of entries, for no reason in particular.

For the past many days, almost since I began moving into spaces in the city with the express purpose of studying/representing them, I have been visiting Jagat Cinema near Jama Masjid at regular intervals. There is no concrete reason for me to be doing this – it is certainly not one of the 'mainstream' cinemas, it possibly has little to do with most of the dynamic, cutting-edge and influential media flows in the city and it is considered down market, even by the rickshawallahs in Old Delhi. I think that may be the reason actually...

There is the grave of a *Pir* underneath the space the movie screen occupies today, and every Friday *Niyazi* is offered. No one, neither Hindu nor Muslim, goes near the movie screen wearing shoes. Naeem, the old and bespectacled electrician who makes the offering, is quite mysterious about the origins of this ritual. '*Ek din jab time milega phir bataunga, yeh kaun aur kaise log the,*' he tells me with an air of foreboding, every time I ask him. There is a chicken shop next door to Jagat, run by Pahua Pehelwan (an aging wrestler) who refuses to discuss *gundagardi* and the black ticket circuit with me because he is still quite involved in the

local political network in the city and thinks that I may be some sort of newspaper reporter type figure.

Another thing that has intrigued me is the aura of anytime-possible termination of the space, as it exists now; an aura that has become a reality for many of the cinema halls in the interiors of Old Delhi. In the last five years, Kumar Talkies has been sold to become a commercial complex, Majestic has been taken over by the gurdwara next to it and Minerva, Novelty and Westend have shut down because of financial and legal problems. Jagat Cinema itself was shut for about a year [for 11 months in the year 2000] because of a court case but re-opened late last year.

But I mustn't forget to mention the one thing about the hall that fascinates me most – the manager Bal Kishen Malhotra... I think what makes me visit him again and again is that his personality is a fascinating combination of Bombay cinema and Hindi/Urdu poetry. He dramatizes each incident in his life, telling it with perfect diction and a majestic command over language and expression. Maybe I also see in his life stages of my own, or someone I might be many years later, full of wishes that I never fulfilled. He used to direct plays and loved the theatre but gave up on it. So did I. He wanted to make films, but never did... I thought I would start a revolution, one day. Apparently, he tried and failed (this, the story of the New Cinema Employees Association, is the one that he tells the best).

Recently, the hall has shifted from screening re-release B-circuit films (old Dharmendra and Mithun ones) to more recent, locally produced C-circuit films (the film last week was *Kaam Granth*, this week is *Kaatil Chudail*). This is different from Ritz and Rivoli which show foreign films with 'pornographic' inserts. Here, in these films all the actors and crew are Indian and the 'exposure' is very much a part of the story and not an insert. This is something else that has interested me since I began PPHP, the C-circuit films at Ritz, Rivoli and other halls. I thought I might even make an effort and try and write something substantial about it, at some point. Of course, I was sure (and still am) that if I were to write something about the 'morning show' culture, it wouldn't be in the vein of 'here are all these depraved men doing all these disgusting things.' I do after all, fancy myself as an anthropologist, understanding the kinds of things people do even if they don't fit into my frame of reference.

Let me now start with my unsettling experience, the first – I was sitting in BKji's (the manager's) office, as I always do when I come to Jagat, sipping on the Coke that he always orders for me as soon as

I enter. A representative for a local distributor comes to the office – he has got the trailer for a C-circuit film that will probably play at Jagat from next week called *Duplicate Sholay* (this is different from *Rampur ke Sholay*)... BKji shows me the film poster – there are many other duplicates even apart from Amitabh Bachchan and Dharmendra – Sunny Deol, Shahrukh Khan, as well as a big-breasted caricature of Phoolan Devi. Oh wow! I sense the opportunity for a media studies essay and an interesting sidelight for PPHP to track. I go into the screening area of the hall to check out the *Duplicate Sholay* trailer. To my surprise, the entire hall is absolutely packed. The trailer begins with an exact copy of the Gabbar Singh sequence – ‘*Kitne aadmi the?*’ The works. However, then begins an array of breasts, always large. Unsurprisingly, these are often bared, most often when the Phoolan Devi caricature is attacked by another dacoit. I have seen morning shows many times before but nothing quite prepares me for what is to come. A few gunshots, and Jai and Veeru kill a few of Gabbar Singh’s men. Then another series of interspersed women with forcibly bared breasts. And this time there are men fondling them. ‘Fondling’ is a bad word because it conveys an element of care. These are men and women, playing out the familiar rape sequence of Hindi films, but this time there are no fans or cracked mirrors to look at. Instead, I see men grabbing, squeezing and wrenching at bare breasts so hard that I can feel it, sense it, almost as if it were real, their violation of another person’s body. The trailer is over and *Kaatil Chudail* resumes.

I have read media theory. I know that people ‘appropriate’, ‘negotiate’, and ‘make meaning’ in ‘surprising, often unpredictable ways’. I have never argued for censorship of content in any discussion in which I have ever taken part. I am aware of art, theatre and film history and the many ways in which pastiche and vulgarity have been used to shock bourgeois audiences. I have read and admired Bakhtin’s celebration of the lowbrow. But there was something about *Duplicate Sholay* that made me sick, so sick that I couldn’t take it. Suddenly I understood BKji’s stories of *Pakeezah* and *Deewar* better. I could see that he might have been happier then, as a young man, a fire and brimstone union leader, working as a gatekeeper at the same cinema, admiring and revelling in the films that he was letting people in to see. I felt sympathetic.

And here begins the unsettling experience, the second. A bit later the same evening a few employees of the cinema asked to be let into BKji’s office. About ten of them came in till there was no space for anyone else to enter. Here is the background – in the one year

that Jagat was shut a number of the employees were offered some pay so as not to take up alternative employment because the cinema was expected to ‘open shortly’ for the entire year. Many of them had substantial outstanding dues from that time, and some hadn’t been paid for periods even after the hall was opened. Subsequently, many of them had gotten together and were thinking of filing a court case against the owners of Jagat Cinema. However, they knew that if they did this, the court case, as court cases invariably do, might threaten to stretch interminably. The workers were in the office that evening, asking for a resolution to the problem. I thought of BKji, and the passion with which he had told me his stories – leading a *mashaal juloos* from Regal Cinema in a late October night in 1979. And then the time he was beaten up, attacked from behind (*meri peeth par Hindustan ka naksha bana diya tha*, he told me) and how despite that he had continued the strike against the same owners these employees were battling today. The ten people in the room were hesitant to speak. Finally, one of the gatekeepers spoke. He said that they wanted all their outstanding dues to be paid back within the next two months.

BKji put on the same public voice he would use to speak into my high-tech looking mini-disc recorder and made a counter-offer. He said that he would ensure that they each got Rs 500 extra per month and subsequently their balance payment would be calculated and returned at this monthly rate. There was silence for a bit and then another gatekeeper spoke. He said that might not be enough, they might have to go back and think of filing a case. BKji’s voice rose a little – ‘Suppose I was to suddenly suspend you from duty for a month,’ he said, ‘I challenge you to return with any form of litigation at the end of that month.’ Saying that BKji thumped the table hard and his voice rose a little more, ‘I offer you an entire month to prove yourself,’ he continued. ‘There is no better example before us than Ram Dutt, and the labour commissioner was his relative. He tried all he could and till today more than Rs 10000 of his are still due.’ Looking slightly unsure the employees left his office, telling him they would make their decision by 6 o’clock tomorrow. Turning to me, BKji asked ‘So, how’s your project going?’

‘Not that well,’ I answered.

A few weeks back, moved by a poem he had recited, I had told BKji that I could see the revolutionary, the dramatist, the actor and the filmmaker in him. He told me ‘*Arre yaar, mei sher hota tha, sher. Abhi bhi sher houn. Par abh mujhe lagne laga hain ki mei circus ka sher houn.*’

# Books

**MAKING MEANING IN INDIAN CINEMA**  
edited by Ravi S. Vasudevan. Oxford University  
Press, New Delhi, 2000.

THE first question to ask is, of course, what is the 'Indian cinema' that is to be made meaning in? Do Assamese, Malayalam and Marathi cinemas *not* constitute 'Indian cinema' as they are not referred to, even tangentially, in this collection? What of the C-circuit cinema and the politics of modern film-exhibition spaces and circumstances? As in all collections, there are only some issues that can be addressed, which makes the grandiose title of this one particularly problematic, especially considering the *nature* of the articles included. A title as 'hegemonic' as this one does not suit a collection largely informed by the work of the *Subaltern Studies* collective and feminist film theory. Making Meaning in 'Mainstream' Indian Cinema, maybe?

As the preface of the book states, 'This volume was inspired by a seminar, "Making Meaning in Indian Cinema", held at the Indian Institute for Advanced Study, Shimla, in October 1995...' The book comes out five years later and is hence, dated at launch. The lat-

est movies it speaks of, in the year 2000, are Baazigar and Kaadalan, both dating from 1994.

This may seem like an invalid and quibbling criticism of a scholarly work, but it is not, precisely because of the nature of what the work chooses to engage with. As Ravi Vasudevan says in the introduction, 'If there is a unifying theme to this volume, it derives from the current drive to understand *the political implications of Indian popular cinema*' (emphasis mine). Five years is a long time, especially in a mediascape increasingly mediated by globalisation. To pick two very diverse examples, by the virtue of its 'back-dating', two things the volume does not talk about are the political fracas that followed the release of 'Fire', and the self-reflexive disparagement of stardom and the institutions of the 'industry' in 'Mast'. For a book with highly interventionist content, the time-lag is fatal.

Where the book is important is in setting an *agenda* for intervention, theoretically as well as methodologically. Theoretically, there is a distinct trajectory to the book, almost an underlying assumption, which can be broadly characterised as being opposed to the 'strand of film criticism [which] faults the Indian popu-

lar cinema for its failure to be properly realist, and character-centred... for its failure to achieve a "modern" procedure of narration...' (Ravi Vasudevan). There is instead, almost a celebration of 'our modernity', in Partha Chatterjee's sense of the term. There is a great deal of investment in the 'local' traditions of narrative as contrasted to 'Hollywood' continuity. Also, a great deal of the work (particularly Rajadhyaksha) could equally be seen as tracing its genealogy to cultural studies' intervention in film theory from the early eighties onwards in the West, which argued for the audience's freedom to negotiate resistant and even oppositional meanings to those apparently structured into the text, and has particularly problematized the 'male gaze' of Laura Mulvey's landmark essay.

The redeployments are interesting. For example, Lalitha Gopalan's work on 'Avenging Women in Indian Cinema' draws upon work done on the Hollywood B-grade slasher/horror films to make a case for the sadistic impulses in Indian cinema, unwittingly opening possibilities for cross-gender identification. Ranjani Mazumdar draws parallels (or rather, a 'constellation') between Walter Benjamin's work on *Trauerspiel* (the mourning play) in the time of the Thirty Years War and the 'psychotic' films of Shah Rukh Khan coming out in the aftermath of the Bombay riots.

There is a great deal of concern and work here on ubiquitous presence of the state in Indian cinema (Madhav Prasad, Ashish Rajadhyaksha), which has led to some of the most theoretically formidable articles. For example, Rajadhyaksha takes off from the work of Partha Chatterjee and Sudipta Kaviraj on nationhood and citizenship and goes on to problematize Laura Mulvey to make the point somewhere that the viewer/spectator is free to make (or not make) identifications with the text. This is an extremely crude reduction, but in the text of the article, Rajadhyaksha writes, 'at moments when viewers are most involved in what they see, the first look suddenly pops up... a more reassuring realisation that one is "only watching a film".'

Rajadhyaksha's article is on 'Viewership and Democracy in the Cinema'. What does this mean for me as a spectator of Indian cinema? Or for the other 23 million that watch the cinema every day who are invoked at the beginning of the article, and will mostly not have access to Rajadhyaksha's article. They already know that they do not need to identify with what they see on screen. They already know, without Rajadhyaksha telling them, that there is an empower-

ing, democratic component to the cinematic experience. (See S.V. Srinivas's work on 'Devotion and Defiance in Fan Activity', immediately after Rajadhyaksha's in the book.) Who then, is this article for?

As was noted before, many of these articles could be seen as tracing their genealogy to western debates on the cinema, and even though the theory is nuanced and refined and has an obvious and political investment in questions of democracy in India, it is still a debate *with* the West. It is far more exciting and stimulating, and dare I say *relevant*, when the theory is more grounded in the 'local'. One of the most exciting articles for me in this collection is Vivek Dhareshwar and Tejaswini Niranjana's article on 'Kadalan and the Politics of Resignification: Fashion, Violence and the Body'. This may not be any criterion, but you can tell they love the film and are excited by it. They see the film as being empowering, as signalling 'a different set of political possibilities... the way in which an urban popular culture, mediated by global televisual culture, but implicitly marked as "dalit"... creates the possibility for... resignification, of dalit and upper-caste cultural spaces.' Some of the most exciting theory, drawing upon Gilles Deleuze and Gyanendra Pandey is to be found in this article. I am similarly excited by Ranjani Mazumdar's (From Subjectification and Schizophrenia: The 'Angry Man' and the 'Psychotic' Hero of Bombay Cinema) and Lalitha Gopalan's (Avenging Women in Indian Cinema) articles, which are both *contextual* in nature.

However, it is troubling that only two articles in the collection actually have the voice(s) of people who are actually involved in making films. Ranjani Mazumdar's essay features Javed Akhtar, and S.V. Srinivas's actually spoke with Chiranjeevi and other stars of the Telugu film industry, along with the fans of the various fans associations.

His work is the most exciting, for me, in the entire collection. For it gives an entirely new dimension to film theory, away from the analysis of narrative and form along with Stephen Hughes' historical study on 'Policing Silent Film Exhibition in Colonial South India'. For here the people who actually see the films, and the material circumstances of film exhibition are considered worthy of academic study – which is a refreshing change.

And a change which has been institutionalised and is reflected in the work now being done by Ravi Vasudevan (the PPHP project – Publics and Practices in the History of the Present) and by Ashish Raja-

dhyaksha (work on the circulation of movies on low-end digital copies). Which is one of the reasons why, looking back to 2000, 'Making Meaning...' seems like an agenda.

An agenda with a long way to go. 'We would also have to stay alert to cultural histories of advertising, radio, recording and television industries as they intersect with the history of cinema...' says Ravi Vausdevan in the introduction.

So far, there is no work on 'Kyunki Saans Bhi Kabhi Bahu Thi' that I am aware of.

Anand V. Taneja

### **THE SECRET POLITICS OF OUR DESIRES**

by Ashis Nandy. Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1998.

THE popular Indian film has a curious shelf life. It stands to be repeatedly resurrected in its original 'authentic' form or is completely transmogrified and reassembled through varying modes of circulation, percolating into public consciousness in ingenious ways. In the last ten years, one such site of frequent resurrection has been the academic essay. Yet the academic text when compared to the filmic ones it is predicated on has fared dismally in terms of longevity. Not only has it failed to keep up with the constantly shifting and relatively transient nature of the most prolific film industry in the world but has frequently lapsed into, to borrow Vivek Dhareashwar's phrase, 'a paralyzing historicism'.

*The Secret Politics of Our Desires* edited by Ashis Nandy, first published in 1998, is perched precariously on that edge of intimated irrelevance. This symposium which attempts to establish 'an alternative, non-formal frame of political and social analysis' for popular cinema and the culture of politics in South Asia is loosely arranged around a schematic that is laid out by Nandy in his introduction: Indian popular cinema as a slum's eye view of politics. The 'popular' as an arena of academic scrutiny is seductively easy to understand if we persist in the belief that we live in a relatively homogenous society and that people are fundamentally all the same. It becomes a much more complex issue when we take into account that most post-industrial, developing societies are composed of a huge variety of social groups and subcultures, all held together in a network of social relations in which one of the most significant factors is the differential distribution of power. Such a view also posits a plurality of points of

resistance whose only unity lies in the fact of their resistance but not the form it may take.

Nandy is to an extent aware of these issues and presents his case in an inimitable polemical style using the *slum* as his defining metaphor. Here the slum as the 'unintended city' is configured through two tropes that have parallel resonances within the popular film narrative – 'the remembered village and the compacted heterogeneity of stranger-neighbours, with the former often providing a frame to cope with the latter.' Nandy extends his argument to claim that the popular cinema serves as 'the poor man's political scientist.' His lucid yet amorphously structured introduction (much like the slum he invokes) is cautious with generalisations and incisive in its reading of popular Indian culture as not merely mass culture but a constant space of conflict and accommodation between indigenous folk culture, popular middle-class culture and massified global culture. Also his vision of the slum (constituting 25 per cent of the Indian population) in its dual role as receptacle and active proselytizing agent vis-à-vis India's political culture and popular cinema, should continue to open up avenues for academic research in the years to come.

However, none of the other essays save Anjali Monteiro's refreshing chapter on official television and the spectator-subject can claim to promise such durability. This can primarily be attributed to the fact that most of the essays in the course of formulating an argument completely disregard notions and processes of spectatorship. One would assume that any exploration of the 'popular' would have to be moored at some level to a concept of the 'populace'. The textual analyses discount the subjectivities inherent in the act of experiencing the cinematic spectacle and assume that the spectators constitute a homogenized polity.

Ziauddin Sardar and Rajni Bakshi's 'highly personalized narratives' on the life and times of Dilip Kumar and Raj Kapoor respectively are hagiographical accounts masquerading as anecdotal histories that are imbued with an overwhelming sense of nostalgia coupled with a cynicism toward the immediate future of the popular cinema, which mires any extended analysis they may have to offer in relation to the political climate in India in the post-independence era. Sardar occasionally takes the moral high ground and posits the popular cinema as part of the larger malaise afflicting the nation state: 'Contemporary Indian cinema is not the only culpable criminal but it is guilty of denigrating the cultural excellence that its society can bring forth.' Both these essays are predicated on



the premise that art only refracts a sense of social reality and are largely unconcerned with ideological structures at play.

Conversely, Fareedudin Kazmi's essay, 'How angry is the angry young man?' has as its pivot the mechanisms of the ideological state apparatus. In relation to the Bachchan phenomena he propounds the 'safety valve' theory where the state advocates certain tropes of proxy vigilantism through cinematic representations which portray 'a form of dissent in leash' working in tandem with state mechanisms to further the discourse for a legitimate authoritarian regime. Vinal Lal's extrapolation about how Hindi cinema bound by generic conventions does not allow any space for the outsider/Other is unfortunately the most dated piece in the collection, though he does briefly dwell on the possibility of a change acknowledging the increasingly jingoistic pitch of the modernizing project propounded by the nation state and the rapid emergence of the Muslim-as-terrorist construct.

Anjali Monteiro's study (Official television and unofficial fabrications of the self) of Goan working-class communities in Kamgar Nagar and their constant negotiation with television culture exists in sharp relief to the rest of the essays in the book. Monteiro emphasises the contradictions that inevitably arise through the act of identity reconstitution for the 'spectator-subject' vacillating between his/her role as a passive susceptible viewer and discerning agent who uses television as an essential information conduit. Thus, a certain simultaneity of resistance and subsumption to power discourses vis-à-vis the television is established where the viewer responses range from calculated indifference to 'negotiated acceptance to complete incorporation of the televisual discourse.' While foregrounding the claims of the 'spectator-subject' Monteiro dismantles what she calls two-dimensional models of power such as 'target audience' (culled from the development discourse), 'sovereign consumer' (from market research) and 'the falsely conscious masses' (of cultural dependency). Almost all the other essays in the collection are hinged on such limiting paradigms of power.

This brings us back to the earlier point about textual analyses that is completely removed from the matrix of the 'spectator-subject' and hence poses the threat of being fairly reductive in its readings. Film studies as a formal discipline emerged out of literature and history departments in universities over the last fifty years, as a consequence of which a certain primacy was attached to film-as-text analyses. As an account of

which film studies as an evolving category continues to accord a centrality to narratology and relies heavily on semiotics, structuralism, psychoanalysis and other western *literary* theoretical models but at the same time tends to be completely divorced from the working mechanisms of the industry that produce the text or the economies (financial and cultural) that sustain it. This automatically leads to a narrowing of the scope of inquiry and results in frequent tautological lapses.

Thus, in order to keep the discipline vibrant and dynamic there is a need to scramble to new vantage points of analysis. Already certain shifts are discernable over the last few years and new areas of academic investigation have begun to coalesce: the film distribution circuits; the phenomena of film piracy; the subcultures of cinema halls; trade journals; film posters; the investments behind star personas; the strategies of film technicians; the politics of representation through satellite and cable television networks, and so on. These investigations if nothing else, will unpack new vistas of information that may well serve to rescue textual analysis from its atrophied nature and finally reveal secrets about the Indian cultural polity and popular cinema in yet unimagined and desirable ways.

Ankur Khanna

**COLONIAL INDIA AND THE MAKING OF  
EMPIRE CINEMA: Image, Ideology and Identity** by Prem Chowdhry. Vistaar Publications, New Delhi, 2000.

THE work under review is a reading of three 'empire films' of the 1930s and 1940s. This reading, the author, Prem Chowdhry claims, 'is the result of an unexpected beginning.' It was actually 'a freak reference regarding the outcome of a riot in Bombay in 1938 in the wake of the screening of a British film' that motivated her to explore this territory of cinematic experiences. For a text of film studies, this is an unusual starting point. However, for a social historian (Prem Chowdhry proclaims herself in this role) this entry point is quite understandable. Any dispute or event provides a rich mine of data which social historians or social anthropologists love to explore. Even for Braudel, 'event' can be studied as a litmus paper, which reveals the structure of the culture.

With this dispute, a resistance against the colonial screen, a methodological field of enquiry opens up with its colonising gaze, empirical structures and gendered scopic regimes. What is more crucial and

refreshing is an attempt to study the multi-layered responses and resistance to this empirical cultural venture directed to control not just the native eye but also the body politics of colonies.

The book tries to locate this reading of three empire films – *The Drum*, *Ganga Din* and *The Rains Came* into their respective historical frames. The term, empire cinemas, means both the British as well as Hollywood cinemas made mainly during the 1930s and 1940s 'which projected a certain vision of the empire in relation to its subjects.' The shared common view points among Hollywood and British film industries and the acceptance of certain ideological concerns and images in keeping with this empirical vision have been assumed here. These shared features include: the defence of India as the pivot on which the plot revolved; the North West Frontier Province as location; the late 19th century as the historical period of reference and the military venture of pax-Britannica for the protection of innocent tribals against few corrupt and crooked members of the same community backed by the classical enemies of British empire, i.e. the Russians or Germans. From a social historian, it was expected to problematise and critically evaluate this 'shared and common viewpoints' a little further than what has been offered in the book.

The issues raised by the author cover a wide terrain. She claims, 'This work establishes the live, volatile relationship between Indian audiences (with varied identities, as active consumers and receivers of the cinematic enterprise) and the empire films through an exploration of the ways in which cinematic and other discourses were negotiated for meanings' (p. 9).

The selection of films in the book is significant as they interact with the changing and complex colonial ideological structures of their historical time frames in very interesting manners.

In the Introduction, Prem Chowdhry sets out the agenda for the study. Contextualising empire films on a popularity graph, she provides statistical figures to back her argument that 'the audience for western films, especially for the high-adventure genre, was clearly not limited to the educated middle class but drew its viewership from different segments of Indian society.' By 1939 there were 1265 permanent cinemas in India and 500 touring ones. She has identified the nature and level of participation of the Indian audience with empire cinema. Apart from educated middle class urban viewers, this Indian audience included plantation labourers of tea gardens, serving army men, rustic villagers travelling to the city etc. The Indian

audience was thought of as being 'child like', 'deficient of character', occupying a position of 'ignorance and moral corruptibility.'

Prem Chowdhry has been cautious in not treating the British/English audience as a monolithic and passive bloc. She has shown the awareness on the part of the British officials regarding the political potentiality and reception of cinematic images. It is crucial to know that the degree and nature of this awareness changed along with political developments taking place within India, a point well made by producers and filmmakers. Alexander Shaw, a British film producer wrote, 'Indians don't laugh about you anymore; they take you seriously.' In fact, all three films chosen for study reflect important shifts in British cultural policy.

The agitation against *The Drum* forced the government to withdraw the film and compelled the Congress to reconsider its stand on cultural representations and articulation of new cultural traditions. At the level of semiotics and the content of the films, this shift has been analysed vis-a-vis the representational spaces of women agencies depicted in empire films. While *The Drum* was overwhelmingly a male film, *The Rains Came* places miscegenation centrally on the colonial screen. The reading of gender politics moving in the cinematic frames of empire cinema is crucial to the whole study and opens up new and valuable possibilities.

The significance of the book lies in widening the field of film studies and incorporating sources like publicity material, official documents, newspaper-magazine reportage and correspondence into the discourse of cinema. However, when reading the agitation post the screening of *The Drum*, a better treatment was expected. A potentially rich field of day-to-day media coverage of this agitation has been clubbed together in a mere footnote (f.note: 107, p. 120). This attempt to contextualize cinematic codes within a historical time frame lacks the complexities and the richness for which the social history of colonial India is known. At many instances, the relationship between representational codes and socio-historical agencies appears to be moving merely on the flat dimension of a discourse analysis, too straight and directly corresponding to each other. Also lacking is the treatment of *mise en scene* and *decoupage* which differentiate the reading of moving visual images of cinema from a literary text.

Nevertheless the work forcefully charts out the shift of cinematic codes and the multi-layered contested domain of responses. It makes a social his-

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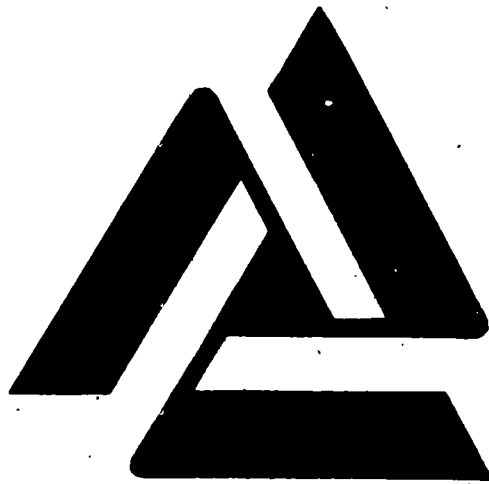


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torian believe that it was always possible for colonial society to colonise the colonising camera/screen.

Sadan Jha

**FEMININE FABLES: Imaging the Indian Woman  
in Painting, Photography and Cinema by Geeti  
Sen. Mapin Publishing, Ahmedabad, 2002.**

Geeti Sen takes the title of her book from a fabulously evocative painting by her friend, the painter Arpita Singh and within that purview draws a medley of writers, artists and photographers who have made womanhood the subject of their analyses. Her recent work has the steadfast authority and depth that one associates with long years of engagement with a field, the outcome of serene years spent as a Nehru Fellow at Teen Murti.

The first chapter is called Bharat Mata and locates the political debates around Abindranath Tagore's painting where the chaste and educative iconography of the serene/controlled woman of India is projected around 1902-05 as the catalyst for shifting the image from Bharat to Bharat Mata. The debates around this symbolism and the song Vande Mataram are carefully etched to provide some understanding of our present turbulence. As a child growing up in the '60s I remember Vande Mataram was continuously played on All India Radio and no one felt it was a political signature tune. The lotus appeared everywhere as long back as I can remember and has only recently been appropriated by right wing groups.

Sen's work locates symbols historically without being judgmental and that I think is the greatest contribution of this seasoned work. Every library, domestic or public, should have a copy, and particularly for blind students the text will appear very rich because works of art are described by the author in rich and stunning detail. Geeti Sen has a fine sense of how words sound so while the pages are luminescent with the rich colours of the art tradition, spanning calendar to kitsch, 'classical' folk and abstract art, words are carefully woven to create a parallel descriptive tapestry. Works and lives are clearly juxtaposed and women's dream and energies are the prime focus of her text. If men appear as photographers or film makers or writers, sometimes as painters, they do so only in as much as they energise women's lives through their reflection.

Somewhere in Sen's work the real world of men's inter-textuality falls short of the overpowering sexual and creative energies of women. Is patriarchy the only

mediating term, then, against which women appear in menacing or assuaging terms? This could be a dangerous flaw of the book, clearest in the photography and film section. The intermeshing of men and women's worlds sounds just that little bit brittle and too many issues, too many worlds are compressed. The last chapter entitled 'The goddess within' also has some blurred parts as if there are more issues and people than the author can control.

Is there a real world out there, Sen seems to be asking, after having travelled much, seen much, spoken and written in many parts of the world. By bringing these idols/ideals, and the craftspersons who continually experiment with forms closer to us, Geeti Sen can rest content because the book has great beauty and resilience. One remembers only the fruits of labour and not the anguish that often goes into years of research. In that sense the inconstancy of our emotions and the turbulence of our years and days are set aside when we capture in print the large canvas of others' dreams. Interesting that so much of the symbolism of women's lives is set in religious metaphors, which do not seem alien to Sen but are part of ongoing debates about democracy and politics.

Susan Visvanathan

**CINEMA OF INTERRUPTIONS: Action Genres  
in Contemporary Indian Cinema by Lalitha  
Gopalan. Oxford University Press, New Delhi,  
2003.**

It has long been a source of wonder to me that a discipline as interesting as film studies should be in the stranglehold of film theory, that most amorphous of theories, (a mish mash of linguistic and psychoanalytic reading strategies) and one which, while foregrounding the process of viewing, often loses sight of the text and its relationship with social reality. Lalitha Gopalan's book, *Cinema of Interruptions: Action Genres in Contemporary Indian Cinema*, is a peculiar mix of the worst aspects of film theory, a daring attempt to get beyond what she calls at one point 'the vagaries of the Oedipal scenario', along with an insightful analysis of particular directors and their respective oeuvres.

Gopalan outlines her methodology early in the book: she exhorts us towards cinephilia rather than film criticism. Cinephilia draws 'attention to a system of signs beyond the central narrative – gestures from actors, *mise en scene* details and even throw away shots – that the obsessive film viewer reads as special sig-

nals from the film maker.' She then quotes Paul Willemen approvingly: 'The relationship between psychoanalysis and film theory has been reversed: instead of using random bits of psychoanalytic theory to generate readings of films, now bits of films are used to introduce readers to psychoanalytic theory.'

However, Gopalan draws from other sources as well through this book, and it is here, ironically, when she uses a sound textual and political reading of the film text, that she emerges most successful. This is why the central chapter, on the films of J.P. Dutta, is the most incisive, and the reason why her chapter on *Avenging Women in Indian Cinema* is muddled and confused. Before taking a look at some of her formulations in the main body of the text, it would be worthwhile to note that Gopalan premises her readings on some crucial features in Indian cinema. Seeing it as a cinema of interruptions, she isolates the song and dance sequences, the interval and the fact of censorship as defining our viewing: 'Indian cinema is marked by *interrupted pleasures*' (italics hers). She goes on to argue that action cinema demonstrates the connections between local and global styles as well as displaying 'a confidence in film making that is most visible in the strengthening of local conventions even as they overtly engage with the structuring of anticipation and pleasure found in genre films.'

In the chapter on women, Gopalan follows the puzzling strategy of contextualising violence in Indian cinema, historicizing censorship, and then, in her analysis of a variety of films that fall into the category of rape and revenge, overturning these categories. Talking of *Zakhmi Aurat*, a film which centres around rape and the punishment that follows (castration), Gopalan concludes: 'Critics have lambasted this film for offering an improbable resolution to rape; however, such a reading assumes that films have an indexical signification to political reality instead of examining how their narratives repeatedly stage various fantastical possibilities of these realities.' Besides this, Gopalan's reading of sadomasochistic pleasure into films that deal with rape seems highly problematic, drawing as it does on the work of revisionist feminist theorists.

A naïve understanding of censorship also informs this chapter; pleasure, according to Gopalan, is derived from the viewing of the female body in its more titillating aspects, and this body is arrayed, as it were, on the screen in the way it is because of censorship. However, surely it would be safe to conclude that this is part of formulaic narrative, not due solely to censorship? (After all, in cultures where censorship is not stringent

at all, one still has the production of popular texts which rely on fantasy and titillation.) Gopalan ends her chapter with an interesting analysis of Vijayshanti, the popular star of Telugu cinema: 'Each of her films overturns several conventional associations between femininity and aggression'; it is also true that they constitute a genre which foregrounds 'the female star economy'.

Gopalan locates J.P. Dutta's films in the genre of the Western, but sees their playing with the 'indigenous' genre of 'daku' or dacoit films. While defining Sholay as the definitive synthesis of these two traditions, she also makes the important point that it privileges an upper caste point of view; Dutta's films, on the other hand, most noticeably *Ghulami* and *Batwara*, 'challenge Sholay's premise by inverting the conditions structuring the dacoit genres found in Hindi cinema, an inversion that rehabilitates an engagement with revisionist Westerns.' The reading of these films that follows is embedded in an understanding of social relations, class and caste antagonisms and homosocial relations, that allow, Gopalan argues, for an equal understanding of the conventions of the love story in Hindi cinema and their displacement onto more violent narratives.

Again, the analysis of gangster films in the same chapter has an interesting analysis of trains and their significance; for example, in her analysis of Dutta's *Batwara*, Gopalan points out that by using trains in the *mise en scene*, the suggestion is that 'the feudal rural areas are not self-contained universes that lie outside the post colonial state; rather, they display a tenuous relationship with the state, whose promises of democracy and freedom are far from complete.' Finally, using and then, interestingly enough, discarding psychoanalytic mappings of masculinity, Gopalan concentrates on defining 'local manifestations of masculinity' and their relationship with modernity and the state.

The rest of the book deals with, respectively, Mani Ratnam's *Nayakan*, Vidhu Vinod Chopra's *Parinda* and lastly, the impact of digital technologies, using Ratnam's *Alaipayuthey/The Waves*, and Kamalahasan's *Hey! Ram* as examples. In a compressed discussion on these chapters, it is important to note that Gopalan does not deal with Ram Gopal Varma's *Satya* at any length, an omission that seems striking given this film's encompassing of several of the themes she deals with in the preceding chapters – from cityscapes and modernity to homoerotic bonding and the implicitly tragic fate of the protagonists of the genre of the gangster film. On the other hand,

she devotes a whole chapter to Parinda, dealing with it in excruciating detail. Despite insights like this: 'Parinda explodes any idea of a safe place for a heterosexual couple in a gangster genre that is more routinely managed through homosocial bonds,' the detailed look at the flashback and its multiple uses, and a close look at how editing serves to 'exploit spatial and temporal disjunctions,' the chapter could be twenty pages shorter and lose nothing in the process.

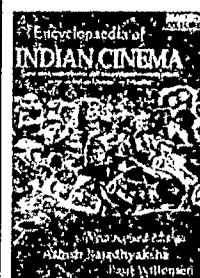
On the other hand, Gopalan's analysis of Ratnam is far more interesting, (perhaps because, while it offers a close reading of Nayakan, it also deals with the director's oeuvre) offering insights into his characteristic song sequences as significant interruptions. Gopalan inserts Ratnam's use of songs into a succinct history of the song in Indian cinema. Gopalan also deals again with the interval: 'In Indian cinema, the first eighty to ninety minutes usually stage the primary conditions of the narrative. Nayakan, however, rewrites this convention by favouring the opening sequence.' Following a discussion on the film as part of the gangster genre, the director's preoccupation with cars and the ways in which cars from different eras signal different and changing functions in the postcolonial state, Gopalan also comments on the erasure of the Muslim figure in Ratnam's films and concludes that the 'jagged representations of Muslims in [Bombay] and other films limit the topography of Ratnam's films, reminding us of their provincial reach as they write the nation state.'

The last chapter has no place in this book; the discussion on Hey! Ram speculates pointlessly on the sexualizing of the male body, the discussion of The Waves appears even more forced because while it might use digital technology, its thematics are entirely different from the rest of the texts explored. Gopalan does, however, pithily sum up her own method: 'Each chapter has a double focus, exploring how a well-worn genre is reconfigured in Indian cinema by attending to local cinematic conventions.' These conventions, she concludes, make Indian cinema well-suited for 'forays into digital technology' – most notably, the interval and the use of different effects, the virtual journeys possible in song and dance sequences. State censorship, Gopalan indicates, may also find it hard to 'catch up with the subversive possibilities inherent in digital technologies.'

This is a book that yields insights as you battle through the discursive spaces of Gopalan's critical universe. What is endearing is her genuine love for Indian cinema.

Ira Singh

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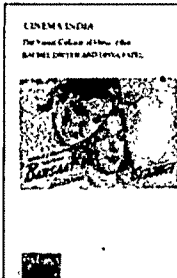
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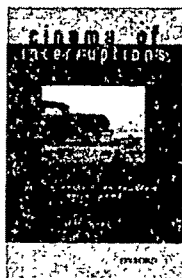
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# Further reading

## LAWS

There are numerous websites which are helpful as regards gaining a basic understanding of the legal framework within which cinema exists in India. The ones that have been most helpful to me are [www.indialawinfo.com](http://www.indialawinfo.com) and [www.cscsarchive.org](http://www.cscsarchive.org) (The Media & Culture Archive maintained by the Centre for the Study of Culture and Society, Bangalore).

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#### ERRATUM

Bodhisattva Kar ('Imagining post-Indian histories', Seminar 524) is a doctoral candidate at the Centre for Historical Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi. The error is regretted.

# Backpage

THE image of a giant Saddam Hussein statue being pulled down in a Baghdad square, with more than a little help from US soldiers, is unlikely to fade away soon. Equally disturbing, if not ugly, were the scenes of defilement – of the statue, photographs of Saddam, above all, of the city. A breakdown of law and order, a chance to loot, pent up rage – take your pick. It is never a pleasant sight to watch a once proud city and people reduced to a Hobbesian ‘state of nature’.

What all this holds in store – for the Iraqis, the Arab peoples and states, Muslim communities all over the world, or us, onlookers to the unfolding drama – is uncertain. The war, invasion, genocide – the choice of words reflecting the user’s predilection – has proven many of us wrong. The military operation has gone smoother than what most sceptics prophesied. No one knows what happened to the fabled Revolutionary Guards, or indeed the many members of the Baath Party. Is it that, a heretical thought amongst the ‘politically correct’, the Saddam regime was held together primarily through terror? This is what the ‘victors’ would want us to believe.

What if there is more than a glimmer of truth in the ‘propaganda’ being unleashed by the mainstream western media? True, the coalition forces have still to unearth any evidence of weapons of mass destruction – nuclear, chemical or biological. But will the shots of prisons and torture chambers or the luxurious palaces of the erstwhile rulers be sufficient to ‘sell’ the story of a ‘just’ war? How is one to square these accounts with the other evidence of hospitals and schools, a sophisticated urban infrastructure, above all, a skilled, articulate and confident people which even a decade of crippling sanctions was unable to wipe out.

Surely, no matter what future historians may claim, it will be difficult to pass off Saddam and his regime as merely a rapacious, tin-pot dictatorship. With difficulties surfacing in winning the peace – be it security or reviving civic infrastructure, what to speak of welding together a new ‘coalition of the willing’ – we may well witness a revival of nostalgia for the old regime, much in the way the cult of Stalin has re-emerged in Russia.

The military prowess assembled by the coalition force may have stunned the Arab world into silence. We clearly have not witnessed the kind of protest

anticipated in the region. But for that matter nor is there evidence of growing support for the US led intervention, despite the ‘reported’ divide between peoples and regimes all across the Middle East.

So, is everyone just watching and waiting for the next US move, the grand plan to rebuild, restructure and democratize, first Iraq and then the region? If the coalition forces behave intelligently, with humanism and humility, they may possibly be able to escape the odium associated with invaders. Why, one may even visualise a resurgent region with indigenous regimes using the wealth, not for purchasing arms, suppressing dissidents and fomenting trouble elsewhere through export of religious extremism and terror.

If, however, this sounds like a fanciful pipe dream, it is less because the peoples of the region are not ready to join the ‘modern, democratic world’ with its emphasis on individual liberty and freedom, human rights and the supremacy of law, but more because the current victors are fully complicit in propping up regimes which serve the self-interest of the United States. It bears reiteration that despite the fig-leaf of humanitarian assistance, the prime energies of the coalition have been directed towards securing the oil fields.

The battle for spoils has already begun; even battles for ‘freedom’ must be paid for. Given that no country, including those who opposed the US intervention, wants to be left out of the loop (our own included), the US can use the reconstruction carrot to win friends and isolate potential competition.

Much like 1989 – the fall of the Berlin Wall and the dissolution of the Soviet Union – Iraq 2003 represents a crucial landmark in the global landscape. The coming years are likely to witness an increasing struggle between the US and allies on one side and ‘old’ Europe, Russian and China on the other to both control resources and put into place new rules of business.

The downside is that a substantial part of this battle will be fought out on our territories. So how we ‘read’ the future and ‘position’ ourselves will decide not just our fate, but possibly that of the world. The emerging situation demands not impotent rage and breast-beating, but leadership. It remains to be seen whether we are up to the challenge.

**Harsh Sethi**

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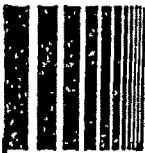
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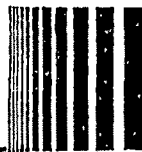
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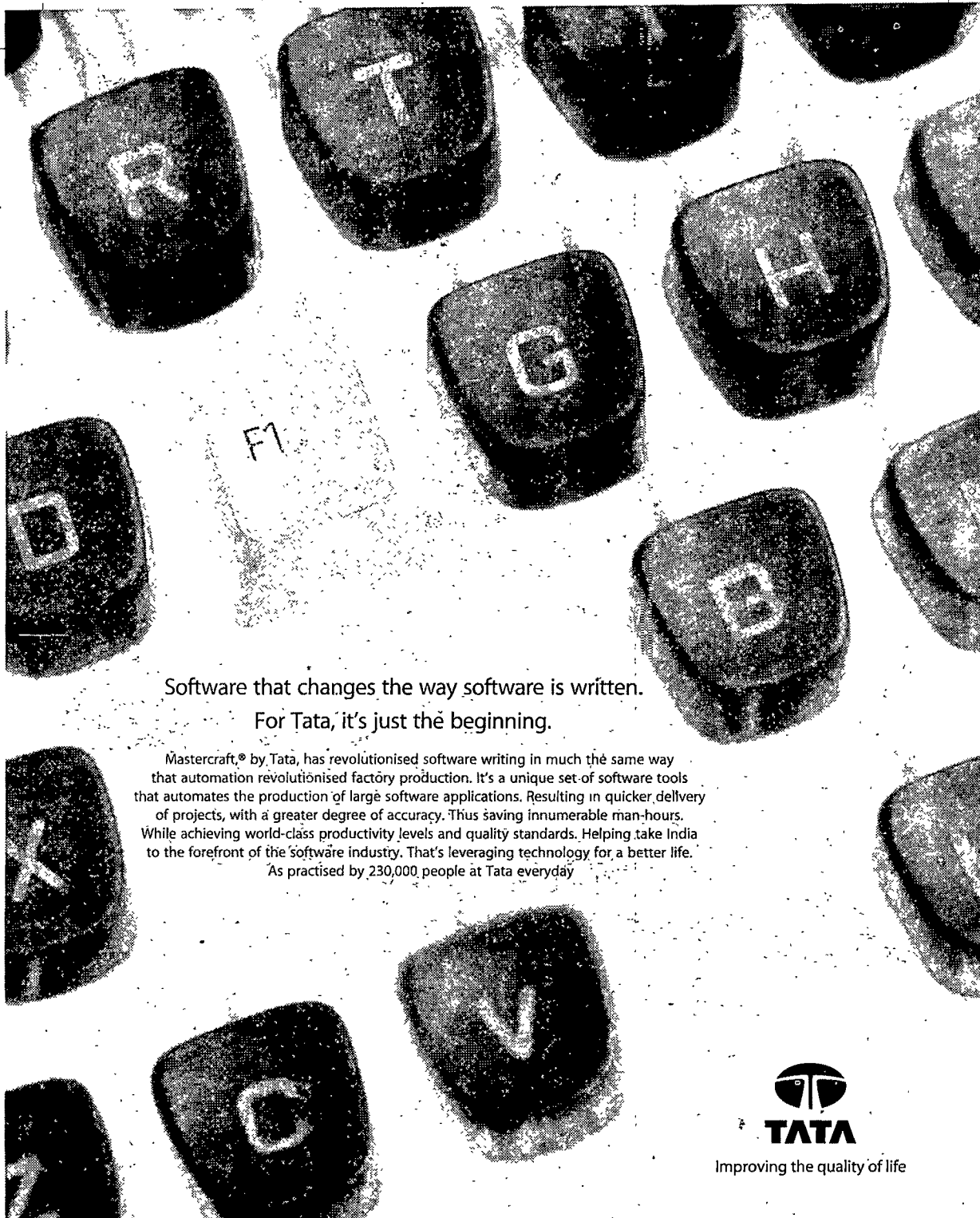


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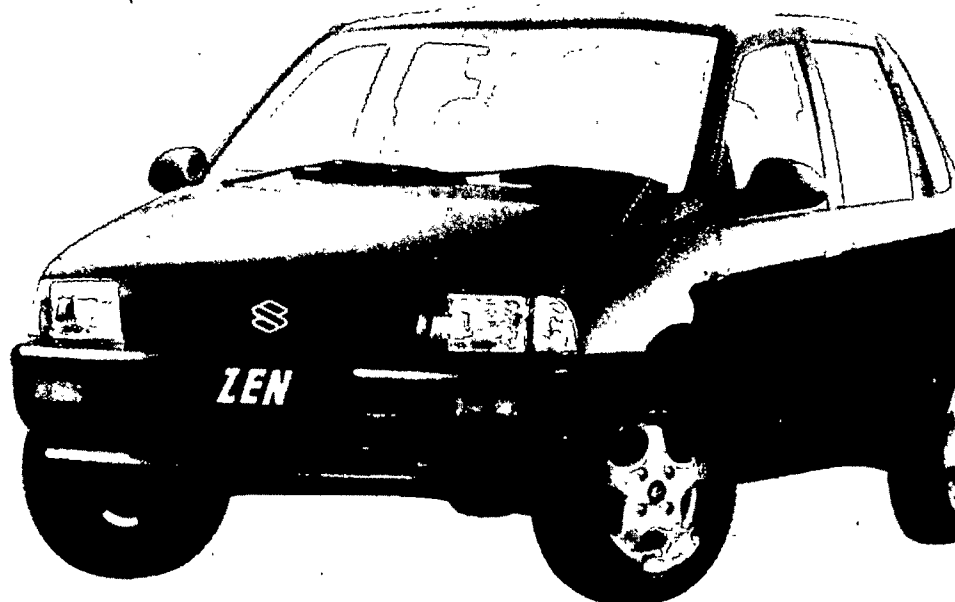
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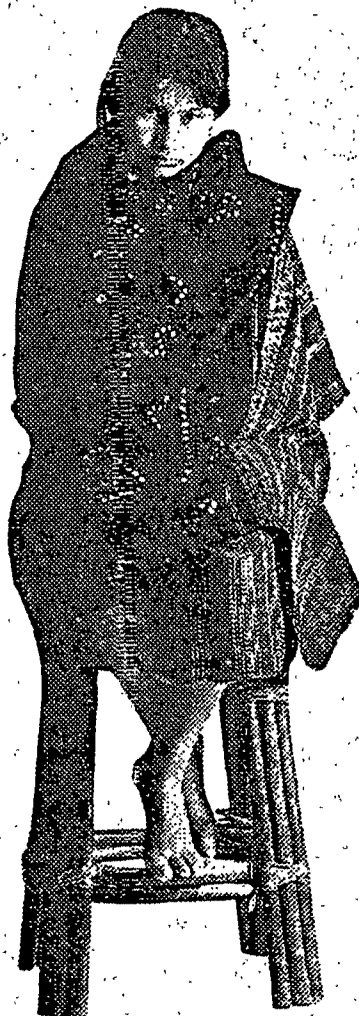
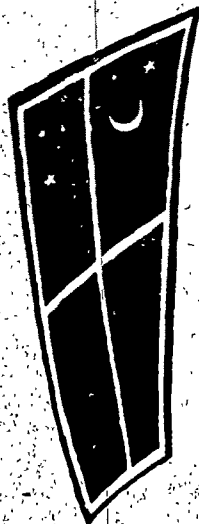


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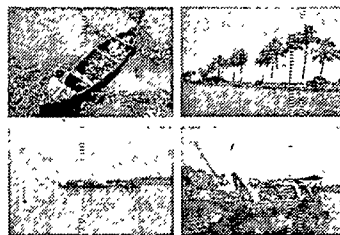
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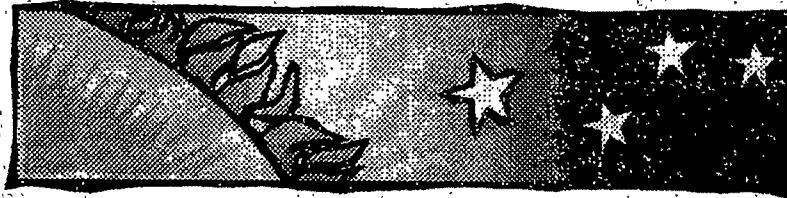


  
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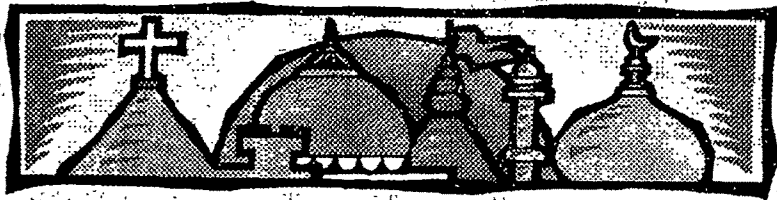
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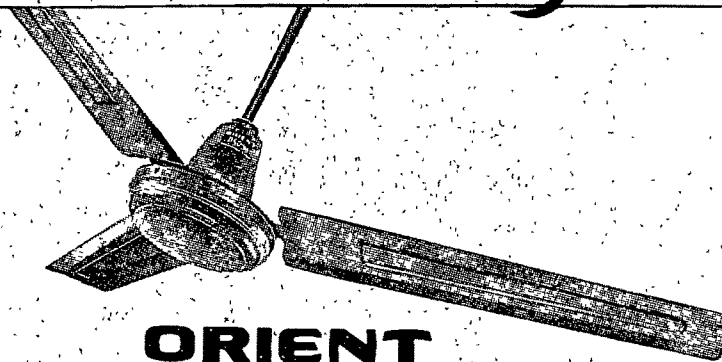
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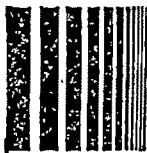
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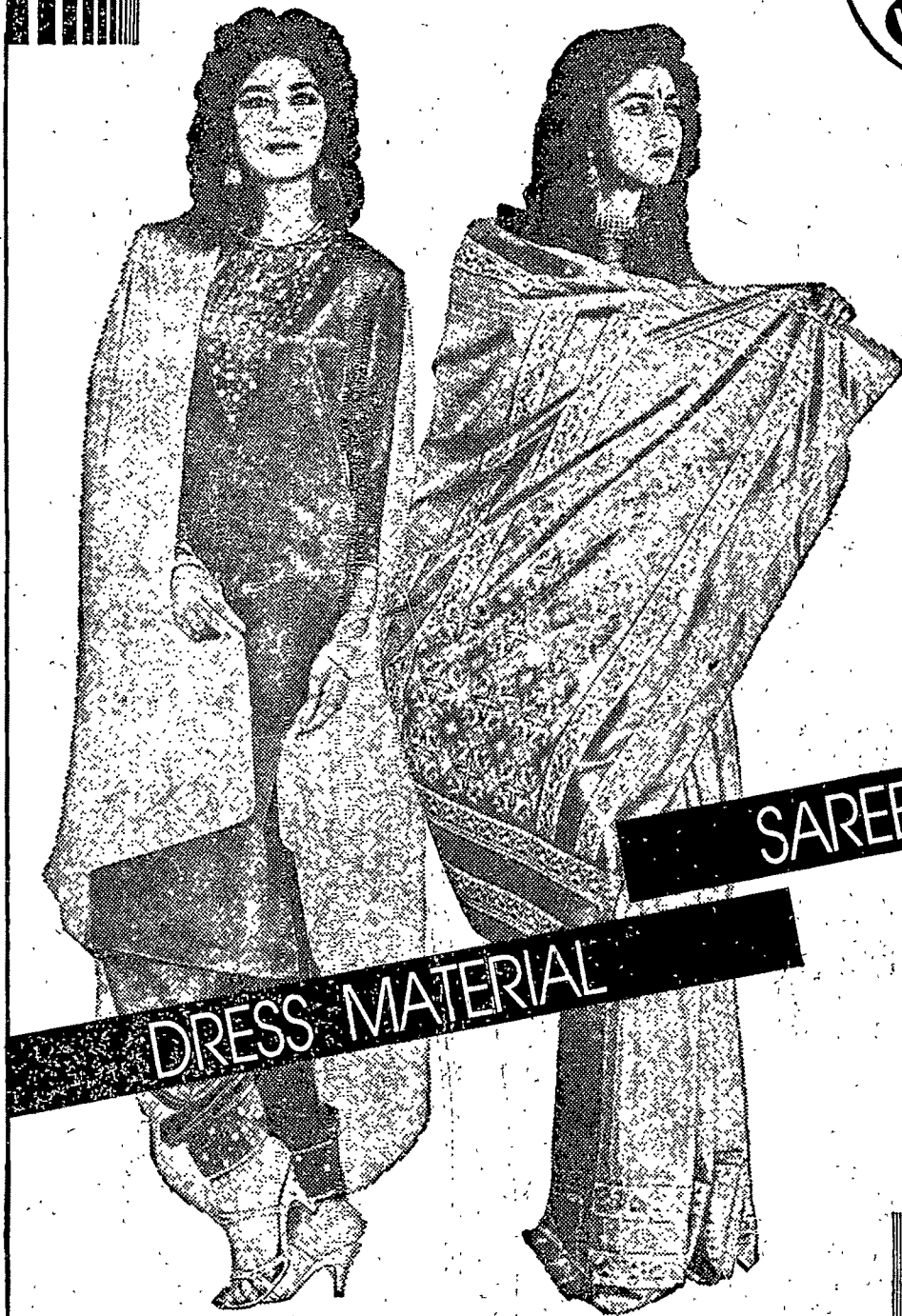
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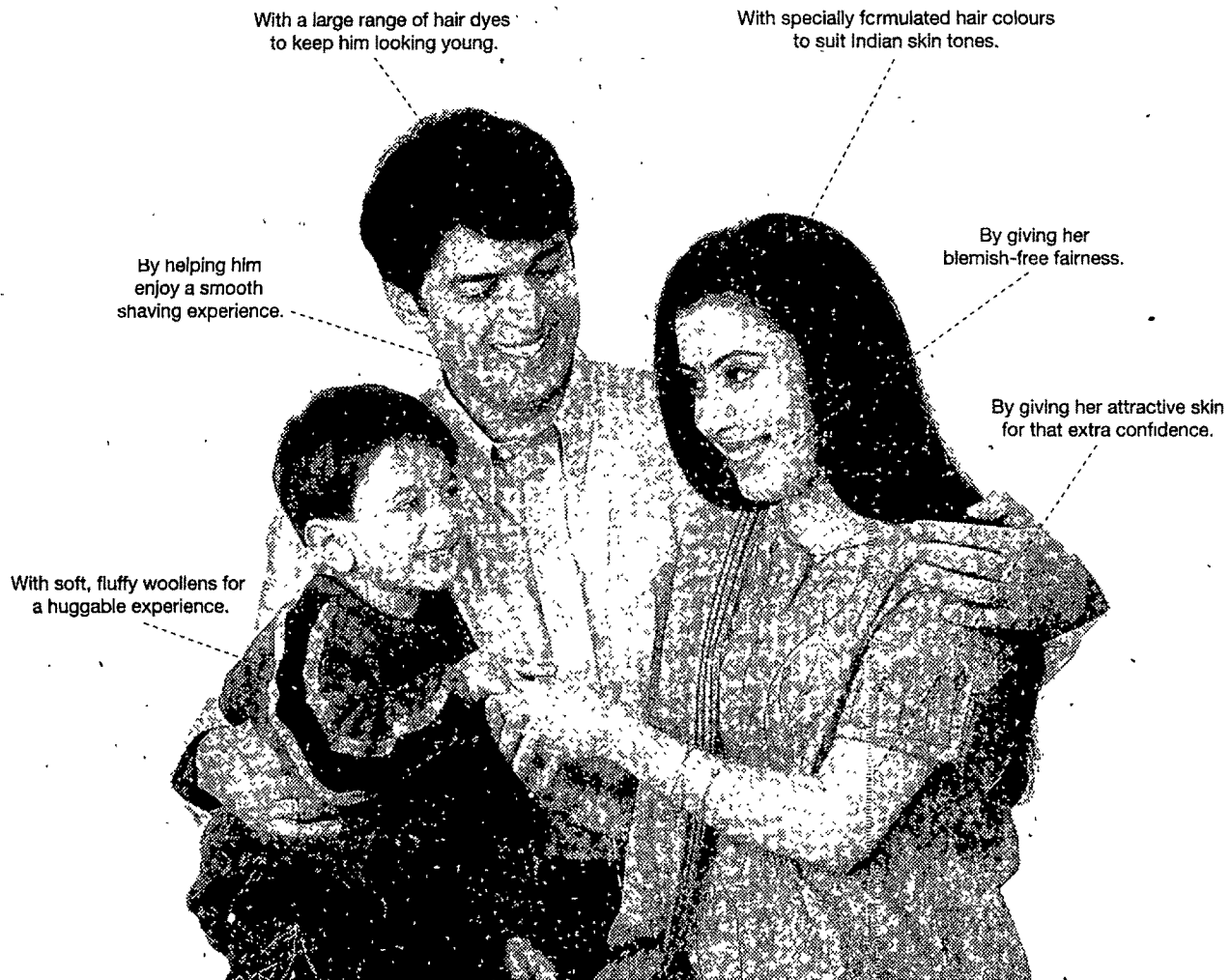
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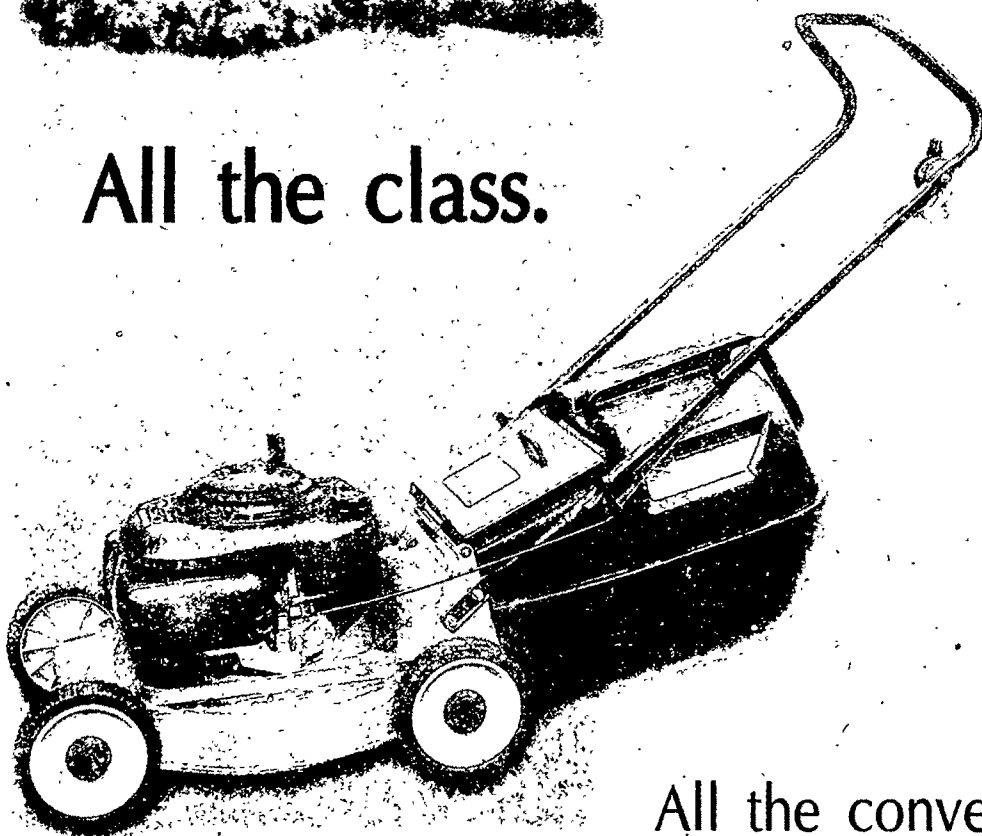
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# The problem

WHEN *Seminar* was launched in September 1959, its first issue was called *The Party in Power*, an exploration of the ruling Congress Party. Much of what was said then, the issues raised and the concerns voiced, remains with us today, though in an aggravated form. Forty three years later *Seminar*, once again, attempts to assess the same party, *The Party in Waiting*.

The Indian National Congress led the grassroots movement that mobilized all Indians to fight for independence from colonial British rule. Despite the trauma of Partition, it swept the first democratic elections in free India. Its constituents encompassed the diverse and varied components of the polity and its manifesto made a grand promise that spoke of self sufficiency, empowerment of the under privileged, social equality, religious tolerance, opportunity without discrimination for all, and so on. These issues remain paramount even today, five decades down the road.

Over the years we have witnessed a dilution of this mass party, the abdicated space usurped by the BJP and other sectional and regional parties. By deviating from its basic premise, the Congress lost its voter base, reducing it to a party that can only make headway in some states, not at the Centre. Not only did it cease to rule federal India, its grassroot infrastructure withered away, and its inability to draw in new blood with fresh ideas and solutions isolated it from the new generation voter.

Over half the voting population see the Congress Party as a party of yore, with fuddy duddies being accommodated in an attempt to play the 'balancing' act. An absence of youth and a political leadership well into gerontocracy, carrying the baggage and arrogance of the early, heady years of rule, have come together and painted the Congress into a corner. Change and reinvention does not appear to figure in its agenda. It will be a mammoth task, saturated with passion and commitment, to extricate the party from this position.

It is not enough to competently manage the internal functioning through committees and consensus. It is equally imperative to extend the outcome of those deliberations into the public space, constantly engaging the electorate. Honest feedback is something the Congress tends to shy away from. It has been much too used to being at the helm, its leaders inaccessible even though they are in opposition, hostile to the need for regular and ruthless post-mortems of their policies and political actions.

Despite ruling in many states, there has been no attempt to create and establish new political norms, set new standards and break away from the corrupt and archaic functioning of the past. Had the party enforced these basic changes and come down heavily on the corrupt, it would have gained new constituents. Alas, the Congress states continue to be ruled in the same manner, the ministers and babus making life difficult for all who have to deal with government. Here was a chance to rectify the operation that was in its control and push for a better framework at the Centre. But, that was not to be. There seems to be little difference in the ethic or rule of a Congress and non Congress state. Corruption is rampant. Another opportunity lost by the Congress to show its paces and 'reinvent' its operation.

The arrogance towards the media remains unabated. Little surprise that the party has been relegated to a small corner on page seven, unmindful of an age where communication is half the battle, and where perceptions matter. Its public relations department needs an overhaul so that it can start afresh with an open and transparent attitude towards the people of India.

That is what it is all about, constantly addressing the people of India through print and the powerful medium of television. Old, has-been faces may be retained in the back room for advice, if required; but they must stay away from the little screen and from press conferences. The traditional standoffish, imperious attitude has to give way to help cultivate a rapport with the peo-

ple. To nurture a few journalists to toe the 'line' is a dead game. Instead, its younger leaders should be out showing their face and the Congress President must lead them in this. The days of playing the shy enigma are over. The party better compete in the public arena.

Alleviation of poverty, health and education, through empowerment of the grassroot workers, both men and women, is critical for rebuilding the mass base. The other side of the coin is to address the new middle classes, their needs and aspirations. Without actively doing both, the party is bound to fall between two stools. To treat the entrepreneurial class with disdain is a death wish; to ignore the aspirations of this fast growing segment will compel these constituents to look for a catalyst in other political formations. If no other comprehensive alternative is provided by the Congress, the middle class will opt for neo-nationalism—the easy option.

Creating the 'alternative' is the key, not being second in the race following the agenda set by others to garner support of the majority. Those very same constituents could well shift their political allegiances for a contemporary and original paradigm, one that makes sense in circa 2003. This kind of invigorating stance could swing the vote. Most old timers in the Congress have an aversion to the new generation and their aspirations, driving the young away from the party. Those 'young' today make up over 50 per cent of the voters. To scoff at them is suicidal.

To assume its new *avatar* tinkering will not help. The older Congressmen spend their time playing Iago and are disruptive. This leads to frustration, particularly in the middle rungs of the party. The latter not only have no point of reference, the party does not provide a platform for free, frank, transparent and critical debate. Secret parleys, the norm, only encourage and nurture friction, speculation and dissension. Secrecy should be abandoned and all made accountable, old and young.

There are simple steps which will help. Drop corrupt ministers in Congress ruled states and deny them

tickets for the next elections. Corruption affects all, the poorest and the richest. Establish unflinching support for a younger core team. Spell out the task, make them accountable and forbid the Iagos to poison the atmosphere. Once the signal goes out, and examples made, the majority will fall in line. Only in such ways will energy to deliver the goods be restored.

Status quo, balancing acts between the young and old, complacency and arrogance should be hammered out. Experience comes from facing new challenges, from rectifying the mess, from making errors and mistakes, from admitting them and not by depending on the 'experience' of the past. That needs to be the maxim. Dialogue with those out in the field, with people of differing opinions, with the farmers and the corporates, with critics and supporters is essential. That is what energises the mind and enthuses workers and functionaries to act.

Access to those responsible is critical. Why should the Congress President not open an office in Lucknow, be in residence there for five days in the month, encourage workers from across the state to meet her, and thereby send out the signal that the party is serious and committed to re-establishing its presence in Uttar Pradesh? If UP is important, the Congress President should be the *de facto* UPCC chief. This in itself would unnerve the ruling party. The scenario has radically changed and the Congress needs to accept that reality if it is to survive and make a fresh bid for the Centre.

This issue of *Seminar* attempts to engage in a discussion on what has gone wrong and what needs to be done by India's oldest political party. How should it reinvent itself? What should it discard? What should it do to represent the contemporary Indian regardless of caste and creed? How can it conquer the inherent problem of caste and communalism? The real question however is, how can it win back the confidence of the alienated voter?

# Can the Congress find a future?

MANI SHANKAR AIYAR

THE nineties were, for the Congress, a time of traumatic transition. In the Lok Sabha elections of November 1989, the party with close to three-fourths majority was reduced to an also-ran. A few months later, almost all the states which went to the polls replaced Congress governments with non-Congress coalitions. The main opponent of the Congress, the BJP, found itself with a BJP chief minister for the first time ever – and that too in a major state, Madhya Pradesh.

By mid-August of 1990, battle was joined between Mandal and *kamandal*. Vast swathes of backward caste voters who had already drifted to the two Yadavs – Laloo Prasad of Bihar and Mulayam Singh of Uttar Pradesh – further alienated themselves from the Congress in the name of Mandal; and through Lal Krishna Advani's *rath yatra*, Hindu communalists found a champion who gave them a fiery rash of fresh hope.

Then, Laloo Prasad Yadav, by arresting Advani at Samastipur, emerged as a new messiah of the Muslim minority, one-upped a few days later by his then party colleague, UP Chief Minister Mulayam Singh Yadav taking such strong action against the *kar sevaks* at Ayodhya at the end of October 1990 that he ousted Laloo as the favoured darling of the Muslims – earning the flattering sobriquet of 'Maulana Mulayam'. The minorities, who had been loyal supporters of the Congress till the *shilanyas* of November 1989, started deserting the party in droves.

By the end of its first year out of power, the Congress was left with no community vote-bank; it was transformed into the residue of every social grouping. Its inclusive ethos, which had attracted the socially disadvantaged to its fold, became the very reason for each community seeking an exclusivist communitarian destiny elsewhere. The sharp deterioration in the economy, brought on by the prospect of the first Gulf War and then the war itself, persuaded virtually every social segment that the national cake could not be enlarged to secure a bigger share for everyone; equity and social justice came to mean grabbing a larger slice to the detriment of everyone else.

What little expectation there was of the magic of the Gandhi name reviving the fortunes of the Congress was snuffed out when Rajiv Gandhi was assassinated in the closing stages of the tenth Lok Sabha election on 21 May 1991. His grieving wife refused to accept the succession and her children were too young to be even considered. P.V. Narasimha Rao became prime minister in June 1991, remained in office for five years, and gained kudos from all sections of non Congress party and political opinion. Within the Congress, however, the centre did not hold.

A section, led by senior Congressmen Arjun Singh and N.D. Tiwari, broke away and the Tiwari Congress had its brief moment in the sun. Soon thereafter, on the eve of the 1996 eleventh Lok Sabha elections, what little remained of the Congress in Tamil Nadu drifted almost entirely with their leader, G.K. Moopanar, to

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\* The author is an office-bearer of the Congress, but the views expressed here bind none but him.



the Tamil Maanila Congress. So, when the reverses of those elections confirmed that public opinion of Rao conformed to the Congress opinion of him, it was only a matter of time before the Congress did what it had not done since independence, and certainly not as bluntly since its foundation in 1885 – cast aside a Congress president like a used tissue paper and obliterate him from the collective consciousness of the party.

**I**t was Rao's hand-picked successor who was the first to do the Brutus on him. Sitaram Kesri dug his dagger into Rao's back even before it was quite turned. But mere months later, the plenary session of the All-India Congress Committee of August 1997 persuaded large numbers of Congressmen that Kesri was no vernacular Congressman come to restore the Congress to its grassroots but a vicious factional infighter whose coterie had concentrated all power in its venal hands. Therefore, the party began disintegrating when, after the fall of the Gujral government, the twelfth Lok Sabha elections were called in December 1997. The most visible manifestation of that discontent was Mamata Banerjee's Trinamool Congress in West Bengal, founded at the end of that month.

At this, Sonia Gandhi overcame her inhibitions over entering the political arena. (Vir Sanghvi, now editor of *The Hindustan Times*, tells me she vouchsafed him the confidence that the very photographs and portraits of her family hung on the walls of her home reprimanded her for placing her preference for privacy above her public duty.)

On 29 December 1997, it was announced in New Delhi that she would be canvassing for Congress votes in the upcoming elections. The news was conveyed to me on the platform of a public meeting in Calcutta,

the first held by Mamata Banerjee's Trinamool Congress, minutes after Mamata had announced that I was her candidate for Barrackpore. I returned to Delhi but not to the Congress; when Sonia Gandhi asked me why, I said that I had asked her to lead the Congress, not come to the aid of the Kesri Congress. She demurred, affirming that there was only one Congress.

However, it took but a fortnight for me to be thoroughly disillusioned with what little I saw of the Trinamool Congress; so, I went back to Tamil Nadu to contest my old seat of Mayiladuturai as an independent. I lost my deposit but got more votes than any Congress candidate in the state bar one. Such was the condition of the Kesri Congress. After the country-wide results came in, it was clear that the public had given Kesri the thumbs down. Sonia Gandhi became Congress president at 5:30 pm on 14 March 1998. I rejoined the Congress at 5:30 pm on 14 March 1998.

**N**ot much more than a year later, yet another Lok Sabha election, the thirteenth, came upon the country after the Congress failed to validate its claim to having a majority to replace the Vajpayee government. That contretemps contributed to a mini-revolt in the Congress Working Committee (CWC). Sharad Pawar, Purno Sangma and Tariq Anwar left the party, followed by no one of any consequence. But between the fall of Vajpayee and the elections of September-October 1999, Pervez Musharraf came to the rescue of the BJP-led NDA. His war over Kargil wiped out all traces of every other electoral consideration, enabling the NDA to coast to a comfortable victory, reducing the Congress tally to a bare 110 or so, the lowest Congress score ever.

Yet, these electoral reverses did not provoke a reaction against the

leadership. On the contrary, when the arch-member of the Kesri coterie, Jitendra Prasad, challenged Sonia Gandhi in the party polls of 2000, he got all of 94 votes in opposition to her 9000 plus. For the Congress recognised even in defeat that abandoning Sonia Gandhi would amount to buying a one-way ticket to final disappearance. She had won all the state assembly elections of November 1998 in Delhi, Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh (losing only the Christian state of Mizoram – which ought to have buried, but did not, the canard about her origins being the prime Congress disability).

**T**he Congress party's confidence vote in her leadership paid off: the Congress is now in office in 15 states, including J&K where its chief minister will in due course take over the baton from Mufti Mohammed Sayeed. Moreover, Himachal Pradesh in March this year revealed what a pyrrhic victory Gujarat has been for the BJP. Sonia is the trump card, and the Congress is not about to surrender the one exponential factor it has going in its favour.

We are now on the eve of the next (fourteenth) Lok Sabha polls. These are not due till September 2004, but the betting seems to be that the NDA government cannot afford another divisive budget and dare not risk a third bad monsoon in mid-2004. February 2004 seems, therefore, to be the likely date for the next Lok Sabha election. Is the Congress ready for it?

Clearly, a Congress which relies entirely on its exponential asset – Sonia Gandhi – is neither a likely winner nor one that deserves to win. The party has to get its act together, organisationally and ideologically. What are the key determinants of the Congress actually being able to live up to the expectations reposed in it by all those

who dread another five years of BJP-led governance or, worse, five years of undiluted BJP governance?

First, the organizational issues. In the 1999 Lok Sabha elections, the Congress lost over a hundred seats (my provisional count is 135) by a reversible percentage of the vote. A mere three to four per cent change in the poll, and all other factors remaining equal, the Congress should be able to nearly double its performance by concentrating on these seats. Of course, this has to be offset against the seats won by the Congress by reversible margins, because in those seats the Congress is as vulnerable as in the counterpart seats where last time's non-Congress winner is vulnerable. It is this kind of micro-level exercise the Congress first needs to undertake to identify seats where by better organisation alone victory is possible – and victory last time round is not undermined.

**S**uch a micro-level, 'vulnerable constituency-wise' exercise might also throw up patterns of problems which require a macro solution that would impact most at the vulnerable micro level. Impressionistically, it appears to me that a disproportionately large number of such seats fall in the tribal belt. The scheduled tribes have been traditional Congress voters. Now there is a belt of seething tribal discontent and, therefore, tribal violence running south from Nepal to the northern Telengana areas of Andhra Pradesh.

I believe we have signally failed the tribals in recent times. Their problems have thus far fallen outside the purview of the political economy of the reforms process. There is, therefore, inadequate attention or priority given to tribal development. The last major Congress initiative in this regard was the Tribal Sub-Plan (TSP). It still

remains the sheet-anchor of development in tribal areas, but because that was long ago, the ritual invocation of the TSP has now become something of a political cliché. No one opposes the Tribal Sub-Plan, but few are enthused by it.

**T**he absence of any imaginative initiative in favour of the tribal community is aggravated by the very real developmental burden which tribal areas are carrying in the name of environmental protection. A state like Chhatisgarh, for example, boasts 70 per cent forest cover; but restrictions on development projects in the name of the Forest Conservation Act fall disproportionately on states that have traditionally conserved forests and hardly touch those sinning states which have wiped out their forest cover decades ago. This is patently unfair. The environmental burden of providing the nation as a whole with adequate forest cover needs to be borne equitably by everybody.

There is probably no single cause more responsible for the virtually uncontrollable spread of Naxalism in tribal India than the unimaginative and unsympathetic implementation of FCA. A Congress which imaginatively examines the problem and provides a constructive, detailed solution in time to reach it to far-flung tribal communities would snatch back the tribal vote; otherwise, I fear the sharpening of the communal conflict between Christian and non-Christian tribal communities by the sangh parivar will fetch the BJP tribal votes that should be denied it for the sake of common humanity.

A simple return to the original 1927 definition of 'forests' might be the key to discovering an environmentally sustainable solution to the road-blocks on the path to development which are fuelling the worst rebellion

against the modern Indian state since independence – a problem barely noticed by the mainstream media because it impacts not at all on middle class preoccupations. (Incidentally, a Congress which allows its agenda to be set by Bahadur Shah Zafar Marg is a Congress which will be thrashed at the polls – and deservedly so. We should leave *The Times of India* to continue turning into an advertisers' gazette!)

The other major organizational change required for the winning of elections is proving very difficult to translate into actual practice. After the debacle of the last Lok Sabha election, the Congress president had appointed an introspection group under the chairmanship of A.K. Antony (who has since become the chief minister of Kerala). I was the principal rapporteur. (Our report, I say with no false modesty, is an *Encyclopaedia Congressica*).

**W**e recommended that Congress candidates be selected at least three-to-six months before the due date of elections in order to give them time to prepare for the polls instead of hanging around AICC headquarters till the last moment before nominations close, as has regrettably been the usual practice. The recommendation was accepted by the Congress Working Committee (CWC) but it has not proved possible to implement it. There are practical problems; there is also an adamant mindset anchored in past practice, privilege and patronage that is proving difficult to break. I remain deeply persuaded that choosing our candidates well in advance could give us up to 50 seats more than we will otherwise get (nearly 10 per cent of the total number of seats at stake).

The third key measure would be the finalisation of the state teams that will take us into the elections. In far too

many states, including my home state of Tamil Nadu, no one knows who will constitute the Congress arrowhead for the home-run. There is no way everyone can be satisfied, and in a party with as much inner-party democracy as the Congress has, it would be impossible (besides being undesirable) to wipe out dissidence and indiscipline entirely. But a certain coherence between the central High Command and its team in the field at state level should make for better performance at the hustings than meandering confusion and contradiction till nominations close, with factions pitting their energies more against each other than against the enemy at the gates.

**T**he fourth important organizational requirement is alliances, particularly in those states where the Congress is exceptionally weak. I would give the highest priority and attention in this regard to Tamil Nadu and Bihar/Jharkhand. We have almost everything going for us in Tamil Nadu but a coherent party. The merger of August 2002 has restored the integrity of some 15-20 per cent of the persistent non-Dravidian party vote. As both the AIADMK and the DMK fall far short of a majority on their own, it is the Dravidian party which gets the Congress vote and so goes on to cobble together the larger coalition that is an almost sure-shot winner.

Neither Dravidian party is, however, today an immediately acceptable partner to the Congress. The AIADMK's Jayalalitha, inebriated as is her wont with power, has quite gratuitously targeted Sonia Gandhi, and the DMK's utterly unprincipled alliance with the BJP – unprincipled for the incompatibility between the fiercely atheistic traditions of the party and the sadhus and sants of the sangh parivar – makes any relationship between the Congress and the DMK

unacceptable unless and until the DMK quits the NDA.

The unexpected advantage of this stand-off between the Congress and the two Dravidian parties is that it gives the Congress the space to build itself before choosing its electoral path. Sadly, nine months after the merger (an entire pregnancy!), Congress unity and cohesion are still to be born. At least 10 seats, more probably nearer 20, and by a stretch of imagination up to 25, are going a-begging in Tamil Nadu for want of key organizational decisions.

As far as Bihar and Jharkhand are concerned, the aim should be to keep the BJP and its cohorts out – and fashion the relationship with the colourful Laloo Prasad Yadav accordingly. In UP, the Congress so far has been co-opting the loser ex post facto. It should perhaps think of coopting the winner ex ante. Happily, the BJP is such a reduced force in the state that it cannot be the winner, although, by Congress default, a defeated BJP can find itself on the winning side. This is the contingency we should dedicate ourselves to forestalling.

As regards West Bengal/Tripura, we must battle the communists in the state while keeping open the door to them in Delhi. And perhaps in Andhra Pradesh, some understanding with the communists might be necessary to keep the very vulnerable TDP-BJP alliance at bay.

**T**his is not the place to go into a number of other detailed organizational improvements desperately needed. But the four key steps mentioned above should quite easily take us over the 200 seat watermark.

Two hundred, however, is not enough. In any case, organizational steps alone would not guarantee even such a modest outcome. For the Congress to re-emerge as the natural party

of governance, it is essential that it acquire an ideological profile which over the turbulent nineties (and into the first three years of the 21st century) has grown fuzzy. The dramatic transitions of the last 15 years or so have resulted in the Congress drifting from its anchoring of the past and the anchoring of the past sometimes drifting from the Congress. To re-invent itself, the Congress has to face up squarely over the next few months to what it was and what it wishes to be – and convey this unambiguously and succinctly to the electorate.

**T**he party, therefore, needs to know itself. Only then can it tell the world who it is – and why it is different to the alternative. Congress ideology over approximately the first half-century of independence was based on four fundamental premises and principles: democracy, secularism, socialism, and non-alignment. In respect of each of these, the challenge before the Congress is to decide whether advantage lies in an imitative positioning to arrest the drift of Congress support or a differential positioning to present a clear alternative.

Fortunately, there is no argument over democracy: no one suggests any tinkering with the basic structure of democracy written into our Constitution, and the NDA's Constitution Review Commission, launched with so much fanfare, has happily proved a damp squib. However, the ugly truth is that ours is a democracy gone stale. The legislatures at the centre and in the states have lost their early bloom, their freshness; the esteem in which legislators are held is at an all-time low.

On the moral scale, the people wedge politicians somewhere between dacoits and prostitutes. A rejuvenation of our democracy has, therefore, become necessary. This

means the Congress championing electoral reforms to raise the moral tone of our politics and reforms aimed at improving the functioning of legislatures to enlarge the scope for the constructive contribution of legislatures to governance.

**E**qually, perhaps even more important, is a deepening of democracy. Representative democracy cannot and should not be about under a thousand MPs (Lok and Rajya Sabha), and under 5000 MLAs/MLCs representing a billion people. The *panchayats* and *nagarpalikas* have now added three million elected representatives to our democracy, of whom as many as one million are women.

India, at the start of its time of transition, qualified to be the world's biggest democracy; it, however, failed the test of being the world's most representative democracy. In December 1992, Parliament passed the 73rd and 74th amendments incorporating two whole new parts in the Constitution – Part IX ('The Panchayats') and Part IX A ('The Municipalities'). In the decade that has since gone by, India has emerged as far and away the world's most representative and least gender-biased democracy.

Yet, to go by *The Indian Express* and *The Hindustan Times*, you would not know. For contemporary Panchayati Raj must rank as the world's least commented-on political and social revolution. Just how revolutionary has been borne out by one partial survey in Karnataka which has shown that although reservations for women in the gram panchayats is restricted to 33 per cent, the proportion of elected women members in the panchayats at the most grassroots level of all – the village level, the allegedly most backward level – is a staggering 48 per cent. True, there is a *bibi-bhanji* brigade. But since when has there not been

a *be'a-bhanja* brigade? And whose son, after all, is George W. Bush?

Unfortunately, even political class perceptions of the role of grassroots institutions in our democracy have been shaped by an uninterested media. My present preoccupations have taken me not only to my Tamil Nadu constituency (where two rounds of local bodies elections have been held, in 1996 and 2001) but also afforded me the opportunity interacting with thousands of panchayat/nagarpalika representatives all over the country, from Arunachal Pradesh to Lakshadweep.

As I meet these thousands of young men and women in positions of real responsibility for the development and welfare of their localities, I am convinced that this is where the rejuvenation of our democracy is beginning – much more than in candidates filing affidavits swearing on oath that they are not the criminals everyone takes them to be, which animates most of the discussion over clean democracy at the talk shops of the India International Centre and the India Habitat Centre.

**T**he problem is that we have a shell without substance. The mandatory provisions of the constitution have, by and large been fulfilled. But when it comes to empowering the elected local bodies to actually function as 'units of local self-government', specifically with regard to 'planning' and 'implementation' of 'programmes of economic development and social justice' in regard to the devolved functions, there is a huge gap to be covered.

The Congress is the only party in the country to have seized the opportunity provided by the tenth anniversary celebrations of the passage of the constitutional amendments to draft a detailed five-year action plan (2003-08) to fill the panchayat/nagar-

palika shells with the substance of 'self-government'. The draft plan is currently being taken (by me) to every state and union territory for discussion and ratification.

**B**y about mid-August (around Rajiv Gandhi's 60th birth anniversary on 20 August), it is intended to call a national convention of the party to adopt the draft action plan as finalised, first, by the state conventions, and then by the CWC. At that stage, lakhs of Congress members/office-bearers in the local bodies in every village and mohalla of the country will acquire a vital stake in a Congress Lok Sabha victory. Indeed, lakhs of non-Congress local body representatives, all elected and, therefore, opinion-makers with decisive influence on a large swathe of the people, would also see a personal interest in working towards a Congress government at the centre pledged to a specific five-year action plan for realising Mahatma Gandhi's dream of poorna swarajya through gram swarajya, as translated into the Constitution primarily through the constitutional initiative taken by Rajiv Gandhi.

The integration of these elected Congress or Congress-inclined members of the local bodies into the mainstream of the Congress party's organizational structure is an immediate and pressing need. Its fulfilment will provide the Congress with the cadres it requires to meet the new challenges which a mass base alone cannot guarantee.

The most difficult ideological positioning is over secularism. The choice for the Congress is not, as is often mischievously or maliciously projected, between secularism and soft Hindutva, but between soft and hard secularism. In terms of principle, the Congress has no difficulty in projecting a clear secularism easily dif-

ferentiated from the idiom and concerns of the Hindutva brigade. But when it comes to the application of secular principles (over which there is no dispute) to specific issues (over which there is dispute), confusion does arise between the hard line and the soft line. Soft secularism is to be commended for its sensitivity to communitarian concerns, majority and minority. Hard secularism has the disadvantage of being easily portrayed as anti-religious in a country which is deeply religious.

**C**ommunal forces raise issues which are communitarian in origin and communal in expression. The classic example is the Ram temple at Ayodhya. The communitarian desire for a temple at the Ramjanmabhoomi is perfectly understandable. A secularist need have no difficulty with the demand. But when this communitarian demand is projected not as '*mandir banayenge*' but as '*mandir wahin banayenge*', and that too as '*Ram ki saugandh ham khaté hain/ Mandir wahin banayenge*', the communitarian demand becomes communal for '*wahin*' does not refer to the location in general but to the *garb griha* being built at the exact location of the *mirab*, entailing the dismantling of a minority place of worship for the construction of a majority place of worship. That is when a communitarian demand becomes a communal demand.

That is also when a secular response become imperative. But that, alas, is usually when the Congress shies away from or inordinately delays a response. What the Congress must realise is that an imitative response makes no ideological or even political sense – for the issue has been chosen by the Other; it is being played out by the Other on a field of its choosing, and if, by omission or commission,

we yield ground to the Other, it will always and invariably be advantage BJP – because the BJP is sincerely communal and the sangh parivar/VHP unabashedly so.

Therefore, on issues raised by the BJP and its sangh parivar/VHP, a rapid action hard secular response is the only valid response possible. When, however, we are projecting secularism on our ground, on issues raised by us as distinct from responding to issues raised by the Other, the Congress must combine, as Mahatma Gandhi particularly did, an unyielding secularism with sensitivity to religious sentiment and communitarian considerations.

**F**ortunately, the Congress does have a body of straightforward secular answers to tough communal questions. The questions were culled from sangh parivar/VHP propaganda and raised by Congresspersons themselves at a high-level training camp held in Bhopal in June 2002. The questions were responded to by, first, a panel of non-Congress experts in secularism and, then, by a panel of Congress experts. The camp also adopted a Secular Creed, a charter for secularism. The work done in Bhopal can be filtered by the party into a manual of secularism which would arm the average Congress worker to take on the malice of communalism.

The fact is that the inner-party dialectic between soft and hard secularism is almost as old as our century-old party. It is after all, the same party which produced Jawaharlal Nehru and Subhas Bose which also produced Madan Mohan Malaviya and Lala Lajpat Rai, both of whom were Presidents of the Hindu Mahasabha, not to mention the Ali brothers and Jinnah himself, who were ardent Congressmen till they chose to slide down the slippery slope of communalism.

In the immediate aftermath of independence, once the nation had got over the immediate shock of the Mahatma's murder at the hands of an ardent Hindutvist, a furious argument over soft and hard secularism arose between the Nehruvians, on the one hand, and the soft secularists, on the other, over the response to the exodus of Hindus from East Pakistan in the summer/monsoon months of 1949; the Nehru-Liaquat pact of April 1950 (over which an infuriated Shyama Prasad Mookherjee resigned from the Nehru cabinet and went on to found the Jana Sangh); the election of Purushottam Das Tandon over Acharya Kripalani as Congress President at the Nasik session in September 1950; and President Rajendra Prasad attending the opening ceremonies of the rebuilt Somnath mandir, but only in his personal capacity not as President, because the Council of Ministers had formally advised him not to go as the presence of the nation's President at a revanchist Hindu ceremony would compromise the secular character of the Indian state.

**I**n September 1951, a year after Nasik, Nehru, taking a leaf out of Mahatma Gandhi's tactic at Haripurá, got all the CWC members to resign from Tandon's team, thus obliging Tandon himself to resign. Then, in the same month that the Jana Sangh was formally launched (with both Vajpayee and Advani present), Nehru, who had become Congress president after the resignation of Tandon, pronounced the bottom line of the secular creed at a meeting in Ram Lila grounds on Gandhi Jayanti, 1951: 'If any man raises his hand against another in the name of religion, I shall fight him till the last breath of my life, whether from within the government or outside.'

The litmus test of this hard secular line came in early 1952 when the

country went to the polls for the first Lok Sabha elections. These were the first-ever elections held in India on the basis of universal adult suffrage. Virtually every voter had a searing personal memory of Partition. The Hindutva challenge came from a pincer movement of the Hindu Mahasabha and the Jana Sangh. Both were worsted. Secularism was restored both in the Congress party and in the governance of the nation. Nehru's hard-line secularism not only won the day, it made both the party and the country safe for secularism for the next 35 years.

**F**or the last 15 years or so, the party has once again been engulfed in an argument within over what one might call the Purushottam Das Tandon-Arun Nehru-P.V. Narasimha Rao line and the Congress party's mainstream secularism. Rao's attempt to be a better Hindu than the Hindutva-wallah ended in the disaster of Black Sunday, 6 December 1992, the demolition of the Babri Masjid and the 36 hours of quiescence which followed when the Hindu fanatics who had spirited away the *murtis* of Ram lalla were given cover and protection to restore the idols at the site of the obliterated masjid. It was the final straw for the Muslim minority. They abandoned the Congress en masse. It is only now that they are beginning to edge their way back.

The lesson to be learned is that there are times when 'those on the middle path are knocked down by traffic from both ends.' I owe the felicitous phrase to K. Natwar Singh on Atal Bihari Vajpayee: it applies also to the choice the Congress must make to re-emerge as the standard-bearer of secularism as Nehru did half a century ago. Soft secularism of the V.N. Gadgil-K.M. Munshi kind (Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan secularism,

I call it) will not make the Congress the champion of the secular cause. In the face of today's challenge, a hard secular line of the 1949-51 kind *a la* Jawaharlal Nehru will not only get back the vast secular vote we have substantially lost, more important than winning elections it is the only way of once again corking the communal genie for the foreseeable future.

I am confident the strong secular line will prevail for India is secular because its people are secular. They are not into the building of our contemporary nationhood at the behest of sadhus or mullahs or padres; it is a secular India at peace and harmony with itself that they want. Gujarat December 2002 was an aberration brought on by the Congress campaign on the ground not matching the secular professions of its rhetoric. The choice between Narendra Modi's communalism and a Nehruvian brand of secularism was not starkly placed. The electorate, therefore, plumped for the '*asli cheez*'. Fortunately, the Himachal elections of February-March 2003 have shown that our electorate is back on the secular track. The Congress would be well-advised to follow suit.

**W**e may now turn to the third pillar of the party's ideological construct – socialism, more strictly speaking, the 'socialistic pattern of society' envisaged at Avadi 1955, deriving from Gandhiji's 'talisman', summed up in Indira Gandhi's immortal 1971 slogan, '*Woh kehte hain Indira hatao; hum kehte hain garibi hatao*'. Till the economic reforms of the early 1990s, the poor saw the Congress as their party, the party of the poor, however much economists might have seen the party's policies as doing little to actually remove poverty.

With the launch of a 'new economic policy' in 1991, designed appar-

ently as making up for the mistakes of the past rather than building on the successes of the Avadi process, the Congress, after the successive defeats of 1996, 1997 and 1999 went into an intensive phase of introspection over the course and direction of reforms. That exercise in introspection ended with the economic resolution adopted by the plenary of the Congress in Bangalore in March 2001, after which the simmering inner-party argument over reforms has ceased. Now that there is consensus within the party on the content and presentation of economic reforms, the Congress needs to concentrate on an agenda for repositioning itself as the party of the poor.

**I**n my view, the key to such repositioning lies in pledging the party to the three Fs in order to attain the three Es. The three Fs relate to the simultaneous devolution of functions, functionaries and finances to ensure effective devolution to the elected panchayats and nagarpalikas. This is elaborated in the draft action plan (2003-08) mentioned earlier. The objective is to attain the three Es: empowerment; entitlements; enrichment.

'Empowerment' needs little elaboration: it refers to ensuring that elected local bodies effectively become units of local self-government undertaking the planning and implementation of programmes of economic development and social justice in respect of devolved functions, as envisaged in the constitution. Grass-roots development through grassroots democracy.

'Entitlements' refers to the level, structure and pattern of government spending on the poor and, in regard to devolved functions, ensuring that it is not the bureaucracy but elected representatives who become the delivery agent for development. A cursory



reading of parliamentary standing committee reports on Tenth Plan allocations for pro-poor programmes shows that allocations for rural and urban development, especially for poverty alleviation and employment generation programmes, are a derisory fraction of the sums required to eliminate the grossest forms of poverty within a reasonable timeframe.

**I**n contrast, the Planning Commission treats with much greater generosity the demands of ministries whose direct impact on the poor is marginal or staggered over time. Worse, the mid-term appraisal of the Ninth Plan shows that the still bureaucratically-driven delivery mechanism for pro-poor programmes results in only a small fraction of budget grants being actually spent, besides spending being concentrated in the last quarter of the year to the detriment of evenly spread development over the whole of the year.

The Congress president has already publicly proclaimed that under a Congress government at the centre, funds for devolved functions will be channelled direct to the panchayats/nagarपालikas (that could amount to some Rs. 20,000 crore a year!). She has also announced that a Congress government at the centre will ensure that bureaucratically-dominated DRDAs (District Rural Development Agencies) will be merged with representatively-run district panchayats (zila parishads) under the chairpersonship of the ZP president, not the collector/CEO. The two steps together, elaborated in the draft action plan, will galvanize the poor and those who depend on the votes of the poor. It is the only way to get from BDO raj to panchayati raj.

Now, the Congress needs to work on its sums to present to the poor a truly dramatic contrast between

present NDA spending and proposed Congress spending on programmes of immediate relevance to the poor, that is, the entitlements of the poor. A key component of this must relate to food security to take advantage of overflowing foodgrains stocks and foreign exchange reserves; another key component must relate to public investment and employment generation to revive farm and non-farm rural economic activity (particularly handlooms) and compensate for the staggering decline in growth rates of both rural and urban employment (including educated unemployment among the youth) which have plagued the economy over the decade of the nineties and worsened dramatically as we wheeled into the 21st century.

**'Enrichment':** Agriculture and related activities (horticulture, pisciculture, animal husbandry, minor forest produce etc.), especially in drought-prone areas which grow oilseeds, pulses and coarse cereals, must be seen to receive a massive boost if the Congress comes to office. Exercises in this regard have been underway within the party for a while and the Congress needs to unveil its plans soon.

**A**dditionally, the Congress should aggressively project the deeply disappointing performance of both GDP and employment growth rates in the last quinquennium, not only the setback since the ever-expanding growth rates of the period 1992-97, but also the fall in key indicators of growth compared to the eighties, the decade of the comeback of Indira Gandhi and the blossoming of Rajiv Gandhi, the last decade of socialism before we embarked on the first decade of reforms.

The last six years have seen a collapse of both performance and expectations. Scandal after scandal

has plagued the process of LPG (liberalisation, privatisation, globalisation). We have moved in one go from stodgy socialism to crony capitalism. The Bangalore economic policy resolution shows how Congress will put reforms back on track. The next step is to incorporate grassroots development through grassroots democracy at the heart of the economic reforms process instead of consigning Panchayati Raj to an adjunct status as has been the regrettable story so far.

When the three Fs are seen as the road map to the three Es, that is, as the direct and perceptible outcome of the reforms process, public support can be harnessed for the next and much more painful phase of reforms. Not otherwise. It is the failure to appreciate this that has turned to ashes the hopes for growth vested in the NDA. The Congress must show that it appreciates the significance of fashioning an economic policy for a democratic polity.

**F**inally, the conundrum of non-alignment in an un-aligned world. We need to understand and explain that while relations between the East and the West have changed as a result of the collapse of the Soviet Union, relations between the North and the South remain as they were. Nothing has changed for us. Our problems and pre-occupations are what they were. Worse, the naked unipolarity of the evolving world order has already constricted our diplomatic space and threatens to constrict it further. Foreign policy is the external expression of our internal sovereignty. But we cannot in isolation recover our freedom of thought, expression and action in international affairs. We need friends in similar need. Therefore, we have to reinvent non-alignment, not so much as a doctrine but as a movement.

We and NAM should start building bridges to the European Union which, over Iraq, has demonstrated its disquiet over unilateralism based on one law for the superpower and quite another for the lesser breed. Europe, let us remember, is the western peninsula of the same landmass whose southern peninsula is our subcontinent. It is the whole of the Eurasian landmass, not just the developing countries of Asia, that are under siege by the forces of unilateral hegemony. A pan-Eurasian endeavour to restore multipolar balance is a key imperative of contemporary diplomacy. That is the enduring lesson of the war on Iraq.

Friendly relations with the US are desirable but the tilt to Talbot initiated by Jaswant Singh desperately needs review. A self-respecting country of over a billion people, comprising a sixth of humankind, cannot and should not look to others, however powerful, to pull its irons out of the Pakistani fire. The Congress roadmap for a peaceful, negotiated resolution of our differences with Pakistan is necessary.

**S**o must the Congress prepare and present foreign policy options that impinge on and appeal to ordinary folk in different regions of the country. Thus, for the east and north-east, cut off from the rest of the country by the dog-in-the manger refusal of Bangladesh to grant surface transit facilities, subject to relentless demographic pressure from neighbours, inflicted with destructive floods which cannot be contained without a river waters augmentation agreement with Bangladesh, power starved in the absence of an agreement with China to harness the 60,000 MW of power which can be generated at the bend the Tsang-po makes as it becomes, first, the Siang river of Arunachal Pradesh and then the

Brahmaputra of Assam, and denied access through Myanmar to the lucrative markets of south China and ASEAN, a new framework of regional cooperation with Bangladesh, China, Myanmar, Nepal and Bhutan is of far greater import to the people of the east and north-east than the quarrel with Pakistan.

**I**n the south, Sri Lanka is, of course, a perennial but given the south Indian presence in the Gulf and south-east Asia, it is 'Look East' (through the Bay of Bengal community and Indo-ASEAN relations) and 'Look West' but not too far west, i.e., Gulf-wards' that is of immediate importance. The dynamic growth centres of western India need, of course, to look further west for they are best placed to exponentially increase foreign direct investment in the economy (the record in respect of which has been deeply disappointing in recent years). For Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and Uttaranchal, Nepal is where foreign policy begins and domestic peace (an end to neo-Maoism in Nepal) and economic development (flood control and power-generation) depends.

The Congress must think through these ideological issues with all deliberate speed, translate its positions into a manifesto drafted and approved months before the general elections, and then communicate the essence of its positioning in readily understood words to the electorate at large through well trained Congress workers and its elected cadre in the local bodies. Such an ideologically candid and coherent Congress, which takes the organizational steps flagged earlier, will be a Congress which cannot be beaten. Seeing that is, however, easier than getting there. That is what calls for high statesmanship and bloody hard work. It is going to be a very long, very hot summer!



# Organisational renewal

JAMES MANOR

DURING the first two decades or so after independence, the Congress party had a reasonably strong organisation in nearly all of India's states. It was not a 'cadre-based' organisation, but it had plenty of substance *as an institution*. In most parts of the country, its influence penetrated downward quite effectively, at least to the sub-district level and sometimes further.

This was possible in part because, as the governing party, it commanded massive state resources. But it usually also had the logistical capacity to oversee the delivery of goods, services and funds fairly efficiently to a broad enough array of social groups to ensure re-election. It was also a formidable instrument for the performance of several other key tasks—three of which were especially important. It could gather and transmit upward accurate information (political intelligence) from lower levels in the system. It could represent the views of important social groups. And it could arrange political bargains with and between those groups.

From 1970 onward, however, the party's organisation underwent severe decline. This began with the abandonment of intra-party democracy which was crucial to its ability to perform these vital tasks. Power was then radically centralised by the Congress national leadership. And before long, a systematic assault was

mounted from the apex of the party on its institutional substance. Factional conflicts were encouraged—and indeed institutionalised—within state-level units of the party to prevent challenges to the apex from below. The result, over the last thirty years, has for the most part been a weak, strife-torn organisation.

At various points since the late 1980s, national leaders of the Congress have signalled their awareness of this and of the need for organisational revival, usually by way of a re-democratisation of the party.

Rajiv Gandhi told the All India Congress Committee (AICC) centenary session in 1985 that 'the revitalisation of our party organisation is a historical necessity.' But as A.G. Noorani has documented, party elections to serve that process were then announced and postponed on at least five occasions, and it proved impossible to hold them in his lifetime.<sup>1</sup> Later, P.V. Narasimha Rao during his premiership, actually held an organisational election. He knew that the process in such a faction-ridden party would be immensely untidy—especially the first time that it happened. And so it proved, with an embarrassing number of irregularities, squabbles, and indeed violent (even murderous)

1. A.G. Noorani, 'Elections in the Congress-I', in *Indian Affairs: The Political Dimension*. Konark, New Delhi, 1990, pp. 155-59.

clashes between factions across the country.

There was even a case of Congressman *biting* Congressman. But Narasimha Rao reckoned that if elections could be held regularly, overtime they would weed out unpromising and unproductive elements so that the party would cease to be 'like a railway platform' where 'anyone can come and go as he likes'.<sup>2</sup> But such was the chaos during and the fallout after that election that he drew back from holding further rounds of elections every two years – as he had initially intended.

Sonia Gandhi's organisational work within the party has so far mainly focused on higher levels – through initiatives and adjustments within the AICC and the Working Committee. But the recent meeting of block-level officials of the party summoned by her suggests that a desire for deeper organisation building survives at the apex of the Congress. This is an important priority, but major impediments stand in the way.

**C**onversations over the last 18 months with Congress activists in Andhra Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh, and with well-informed observers of the party in Delhi and Karnataka, reveal deep pessimism about this. Their views are summed up by a comment from one observer in Karnataka: 'It can't happen. If they try it, they will unleash chaos. Vendettas will come into play. You will see more squabbles, more violence – maybe even more biting!'

This means that Congress must rely on five other things to keep power where it now holds it and to gain power where it does not:

- \* popular discontent with incumbent governments (state and national)

headed by other parties – which may not be sufficiently intense;

- \* popular excitement with Congress leaders and their campaign themes – which may not be sufficiently potent;

- \* campaign funds mainly raised from states where Congress is in power – which will not match the funds available to an alliance that holds power at the Centre;

- \* pre- and post-poll alliances with other parties – which Congress is less well-placed than the BJP to forge, and less inclined to seek; and

- \* the developmental records of its state governments – which are strong only *some* of the time.

If this is all that Congress can rely upon, if it cannot achieve much organisation building, then its future is unpromising. But is party building really impossible? Perhaps not. There is hard evidence from the state level to indicate that it is indeed feasible to strengthen the Congress organisation. Let us briefly consider just two examples.

**I**n Andhra Pradesh during the late 1980s, the Congress was in opposition after a second successive, crushing defeat at the hands of the Telugu Desam Party then led by N.T. Rama Rao. The leadership of the state unit of the Congress fell to M. Chenna Reddy. He identified certain state government policies that were widely unpopular and persuaded Congress activists to undertake large-scale non-violent protests which – as he anticipated – led to the imprisonment of many of them.

When they were released, he ensured that many courted arrest yet again. As he expected and intended, the hardships that Congressmen faced while in custody burned away many of the petty jealousies that afflicted what was one of the most faction-ridden state units of the party. In adopt-

ing this strategy, the model that he had in mind was – obviously – the freedom struggle where Gandhi had used *satyagraha* to forge unity within the Congress. The result was a relatively united party at the state election of 1989, which gave Congress 51% of the vote – a figure surpassed there only in 1972 – and a thumping majority of seats.

**I**n Karnataka in the mid-1990s, Congress also found itself in opposition, this time to the Janata Dal. It had performed so badly at the 1994 state election that some observers considered it dead and buried. But two comparatively young Congress leaders from different social backgrounds – Dharam Singh and Mallikarjuna Kharge – worked patiently to massage the egos of various faction leaders from across the state in order to build unity among them. Both of them constantly emphasised that they were not seeking to become chief minister. When S.M. Krishna was named the president of the Pradesh Congress Committee, he joined in their effort to build the organisation and similarly set the issue of the next chief minister aside.

Then, long before the 1999 election campaign, these three men put all of the state's important Congress leaders into a bus and took them *en masse* to public meetings in every important centre in Karnataka – providing a visible demonstration of the unity of the party. This persuaded Congress activists in the various districts to play down factional quarrels and work in relative harmony. The result of that, and of the unpopularity of the Janata Dal government, was a solid victory in 1999.<sup>3</sup>

The unity forged by Chenna Reddy did not last. Resentments and

3. I am grateful to E. Raghavan for a detailed account of this process.

2. Interview, New Delhi, 11 February 1992. Myron Weiner had made very similar arguments to this writer in the mid-1980s.

conflicts within the party and within society in Andhra Pradesh were too severe to remain bottled up for long—and Reddy paid too little attention to maintaining consensus within the Congress once he took power. But in Karnataka, considerable harmony within the party has survived—partly because Krishna has attended to it in his reassuringly quiet way, and partly because tensions within society and party in that state are more manageable than in Andhra Pradesh.

Congress (and other parties) in Karnataka have also done more to exploit the opportunities that panchayati raj offers, to draw promising reinforcements from among elected members of those bodies into key posts in the organisation. In one of the state's districts, six of the seven MLAs and the MP are former panchayat members.

Organisation building is thus possible within the Congress party—even in states like Andhra Pradesh where factionalism is a severe problem. But there is an oddity here that demands our attention, especially at a time when the Congress holds power in so many states. It appears to be far easier to revive the organisation when the party is in *opposition* than when it is in *power*.

Where the Congress rules, many chief ministers hesitate to attempt organisation building for two main reasons. First, since a ruling party has control of abundant 'loaves and fishes', leaders fear that party building is more likely to trigger factional strife over spoils than when the Congress is in opposition and has little to distribute. Second, sitting chief ministers worry that efforts at organisational renewal will make them seem too ambitious and powerful, so that they risk interventions by the high command.

They badly need a clear signal from atop the Congress to encourage organisation building. There is a systemic need in the party, in which factional strife has been so deeply institutionalised at the state level, for an ultimate arbiter at the apex to resolve intractable issues, and to indicate new directions. If Sonia Gandhi were to appeal for organisational revival, and then to show that state-level leaders who complied would not be penalised, we would see results in many states.

The recent conference of block-level party workers can be seen as a beginning. But more is required, and state-level Congress leaders have been getting mixed signals from the high command. Sonia Gandhi's initial backing for A.K. Antony in a dispute with the Karunakaran faction in Kerala suggested that chief ministers would be supported, even if they pressed ahead with organisation building. But more recent reassuring noises from party leaders to the Karunakaran group have somewhat diluted the message.

Some other Congress chief ministers have been left alone, but Ashok Gehlot in Rajasthan has been forced to accept unwanted ministers in his cabinet, and in Maharashtra the chief minister was changed. There were good reasons for that latter decision, but the messages from the high command have still been ambiguous.

If encouragement from the apex of the party were conveyed more forcefully, we might see greater effort by incumbent Congress leaders in the states to revive the organisation. The resources available to a ruling party might then become an advantage to party builders, as they were in the Congress heyday, rather than a disincentive. But this may be asking too much.

# Congress, secularism and freedom

PRATAP BHANU MEHTA

WATCHING the Congress grapple with the challenges posed by Hindutva, one might be forgiven for thinking that the Congress is acting on Yogi Berra's famous advice, 'When you come to a fork on the road you are travelling, there is only one option: take it.' On the one hand the Congress was seen in recent months as trying to appropriate what has come to be known as 'soft Hindutva'. Its campaign in Gujarat, Digvijay Singh's initiatives on cow slaughter and Bhojshala, the party's feeble attempts to counter Hindutva with Santana Dharma, all seemed to point to a party not averse to opportunistically expanding the space for religion in politics.

On the other hand, the recent crack down on Togadia's activities in Rajasthan seems to many a signal that the party is preparing to fight Hindutva. Should the party appropriate much of the BJP's agenda in the hope of enhancing its power? Or should it more clearly distinguish itself from the BJP by drawing a firmer line on matters of principle? Or should it do both?

On the face of it, there is no inconsistency between these two outlooks. After all, in principle one can be for a

ban on cow slaughter, for opening the Bhojshala for worship to Hindus, even stand for the construction of a temple at Ayodhya, and still be against the virulent anti-Muslim stance of organizations like the VHP. Indeed, many would argue that the only way of increasing communal harmony, decreasing anti-Muslim violence, is for politics to more openly embrace these causes dear to Hindus. Embracing these causes would not only cut the political wind out of the Hindutva sails, it would also be in the best interest of minorities themselves. It would do away with the majority's minority complex, its sense of being besieged by a political system that grants 'favours' to minorities, but is embarrassed to recognize that this is a predominantly Hindu country.

Currently Hindu identity, as it exists, is constituted by a sense of injury and only when its anxieties are assuaged can we hope for a more decent politics. On this view, it is immaterial whether or not this sense of Hindu hurt is justified. It is a political reality that any party with any ambition cannot afford to ignore. It is better that parties like the Congress address these grievances. Whatever

Hindu bias it may or may not have, at least it does not have the overt determined anti-Muslim baggage that the Sangh Parivar does. It can position itself as both pro-Hindu and protector of the minorities at the same time.

Historically this balancing act has always been part of Congress' conception of its identity. After all, during the independence movement it could make room within itself for both the Hindu right and orthodox ulema, at the same time as it championed the cause of modern secularism. Rajiv Gandhi was not averse to allowing the Ayodhya issue to be politically reopened; Indira Gandhi gave Sikh fundamentalism an opening in organized politics and then tried to capitalize on a Hindu backlash. Anti-conversion legislations and bans on cow slaughter were crafted first in states ruled by Congress.

**I**n principle this was a win-win strategy all around. Each religious group could wrest concessions from the Congress without anyone of them becoming a target. And this politics of placating one group after the other as the political need arose was ideologically legitimized in the name of a distinctive brand of Indian secularism. Indian secularism was not to be defined by strict separation between Church and state; the state could patronize all manner of religious ambitions so long as it did so even handedly, and without advocating establishment or dominance of one religion.

A politics of this kind could, in theory, be given a principled rationale; and in practice it had a lot of plausibility. Arguably, it sustained Congress for almost a century. But by the mid-eighties this politics was beginning to lose its plausibility for a variety of reasons and the long term ideological costs of this politics were beginning to be more apparent. It would be fool-

ish to argue that the Congress party began to decline only because its conception of secularism had started running out of steam. The reasons behind Congress' decline are complex and cannot be fully dealt with here. But its conception of a secularism that could flirt with all religions was no longer a viable way of crafting a broad based political coalition.

**F**irst of all, after 1985 and the politics that emerged in the aftermath of the Shah Bano decision, Congress found it very hard to make credible the claim that it was being even handed with all communities. It tried, by first caving before Muslim orthodoxy and then by courting the Hindu right, but it could not effectively combat the charge of 'pseudo-secularism'. This charge meant two different things, though in practice they were often run together. One was the claim that Congress really was succumbing to 'minorityism', an unfair privileging of minorities. Again the 'truth' of this charge is beside the point; what is important is that fact that the groundswell of ideological, cultural, organizational propaganda that the Sangh Parivar produced made this charge seem credible to many.

The second claim was that Congress was really not interested in the transformative agenda of secularism at all because, rather than extricating politics from religion, it went on implicating them even more. On either reading, the authority of Congress' secular credentials was suspect. Instead of befriending all religions it had ended up giving all of them reason to suspect its motives; instead of a balancing act, it had produced a politics of perpetual concessions that made all religious groups active and permanently discontented.

Second, and perhaps equally importantly, the Congress organiza-

tion had been seriously decimated. Its ability to counter the BJP on the ground in much of North India was, in organizational terms, limited. It had no cadres. Over-centralization and arbitrary party rules had seriously impaired its ability to incorporate newly mobilized groups like the OBCs and Dalits into the party. Even if the Congress was well-disposed towards them, the Muslims could not count on protection from it. On the ground, parties like the SP and the RJD seemed more effective protectors.

Any claims Congress might have staked to be protecting Muslims were rendered hollow by a series of events. The demolition of the Babri Masjid was perceived to be as much a reflection of Congress' lack of will, as it was the result of BJP mobilization. The riots that followed, especially in Mumbai, laid to rest any illusions about Congress' capacity to position itself as the benefactor of minorities that it claimed to be. On the other hand, its own misgovernance did much to legitimize the RSS, especially during the emergency.

**P**erhaps most importantly, Congress' traditional strategy reified group identities in all sorts of ways. It created fundamental confusions about the sorts of values secularism was meant to embody. It created a discourse that still casts a permanent and distorting shadow on our politics.

One of the more revealing oddities in the Indian debate over secularism is that a defence of individual freedom rarely figures prominently in defences of secularism. While many different conceptions of secularism dot our political landscape, none of them makes individual freedom explicitly a political value. For some secularism is simply synonymous with communal harmony; the peaceful and possibly respectful coexistence of

different religious groups. For others secularism is a view about the state's relationship to religion.

All secularists agree that the state should, in some sense, be impartial amongst different religions. But some take the view that the best expression of this impartiality is that the state, as far as possible, disentangles itself from all religious arguments and identities. Others argue that this impartiality is best expressed by equal treatment of all religions, but that this equal treatment does not necessarily require the state to distance itself from religion. For others still, the debate over secularism is largely a debate over the asymmetric authority the state exercises over different religions. Does it have the authority to interfere with the practices of some communities but not with the practices of others? But whatever the nuances of these positions, none of them seems to give individual liberty its due moral weight.

**F**ew articulations of secularism are directly concerned with the value of individual liberty. Those who advocate the disentanglement of the state from religion as far as is possible are clearly motivated by a concern for freedom. They believe, rightly, that the coercive power of the state should not be used to advance the cause of any religion; that such use of coercive power violates fundamental freedoms because it forces adherents of other religions to go along with practices that they have, given their beliefs, no reason to go along with.

But mere disentanglement cannot avoid the thorny problem that historically religious communities can (and do) exercise coercive power over its members as well. These communities can deny their members basic freedom and equality and the state will have to massively intervene in 'reli-

gious' practices to ensure that freedom and equality are enjoyed by all individuals. Principled *distance* is never an option for any state interested in securing the rights of its citizens, sometimes against the traditions of particular religious communities. The principled distance metaphor is misleading in so far as it suggests that the state can lay its hands off religion. But the state should be principled all right. It is justified intervening only in so far as these interventions secure the conditions of individual liberty and equality.

**T**he other versions of secularism – secularism as communal harmony, secularism as respect for all religions, and secularism as a project for giving different groups their own space to collectively define their identities – are even less motivated by a concern for individual liberty. Of course they are motivated by other high ideals: peace, sometimes solicitude for pluralism, sometimes a genuine piety towards the diversity of our society. But none of them make freedom a central value.

These invocations of secularism are quite compatible with many sentiments that ought to worry those who care about freedom. These versions of secularism are not averse to using state power to advance religious ends provided some kind of parity between different communities is maintained. So, on this view it is all right for the state to ban practices offensive to Hindus so long as it does the same for Muslims and so forth. So long as the state demonstrates equal treatment for communities secularism stands vindicated.

But casting secularism in terms of communal parity is itself misleading. The parity model produced an untenable politics. Governments established their secular credentials by giving one concession to a particular

religious community and then offset it by granting concessions to other communities in a process of competitive bidding that left all communities feeling that they had lost. The charge of pseudo secularism is essentially a charge framed within the discourse of the parity model, and all attempts to answer the charges of pseudo secularism simply reinforce the dominance of this model.

This parity model was suffocating in so far as it put respecting religion or collective identities above the cause of protecting individual freedoms. It is disingenuous in minimizing the potential conflict between established religions and individual liberty, and it rests on the illusion that all religions are essentially harmonious with each other so that respecting all of them is indeed possible. To say that the state should use its coercive powers to express 'respect' towards all religions equally is by no stretch of the imagination the same thing as saying that each individual ought to have as much freedom as is compatible with a similar freedom for others.

**I**n the whole thicket of issues that are wrecking secularism, from the debate over conversion to cow slaughter, very few protagonists stake the simple and obvious claim: each individual has as much liberty as is compatible with a similar liberty for others. This claim has three large implications for secularism. First, secularism is not about respecting this or that religion and granting them due recognition. It is about giving individuals the freedom to realize themselves in whatever way they choose to do so, in whatever religion or without religion at all. The state is not in the business of saving anyone's soul; it is not in the business of advancing any particular religious conception or conceptions. Its primary function, other than securing

security and a minimum of well-being for all citizens, is protecting their liberty as individuals.

Second, the state has an obligation to ensure that this freedom is secured for all individuals, sometimes even against the prohibitions that religious communities impose upon them. Third and most importantly, no majority can override the basic rights of individuals, no matter how strong their sentiments. When the state uses the sentiments of the majority as an argument to impose restrictions on what people may think, what they may eat and so forth, it violates the fundamental tenets of freedom.

**F**reedom is admittedly a complex notion, but making it basic has certain advantages. It better defines the goals of our collective arrangements. Our collective project is to create a free society, where only those interdictions on freedom can be justified that serve the cause of freedom itself, not the cause of this or that community. Second, taking freedom seriously does not require us to make contorted distinctions between the secular and the sacred; it does not enjoin us to view our identities or our histories in any particular way. All it requires is a commitment to the idea of freedom itself, the freedom to define ourselves in whatever way we please, the freedom to think our own thoughts, secure in the belief that no collectivity, however deep its sentiments, can violate the rights of individuals.

The proper antidote to majoritarian politics is not some nebulous ideal enjoining respect for all communities. The proper antidote is the cultivation of a love of individual freedom that rejects the thought that any community, majority or minority, can define the identities and circumscribe the possibilities of any of the individuals that compose it.

The Congress' inability to connect secularism with freedom extracted a high price. It prevented secularism from being the transformative project that it was meant to be. It reified group identities, often orthodox ones.<sup>1</sup> Just think of the way in which Congress has constructed Muslim identity.

**D**uring the nationalist movement, it was very keen on claiming that Congress could represent Muslim interests at least as much as the Muslim League; the Muslim League could not claim sole monopoly over the question of Muslim representation. This claim was crucial to Congress' conception of itself and, by extension, India, as having a pluralist identity. But what Congress could not ever seriously question was the idea that there was a singular Muslim identity.

After independence, rather than providing meaningful space for Muslim politics, a space for debate, contestation and reform, Congress tried to incorporate them as a supplicant minority. This meant on the one hand playing the politics of symbolic state support of religious activities of Muslims, without any attempt to provide them with those resources that would more effectively integrate them into the political mainstream. It even consistently privileged negotiating with Muslims on religious issues rather than on issues such as Urdu education.

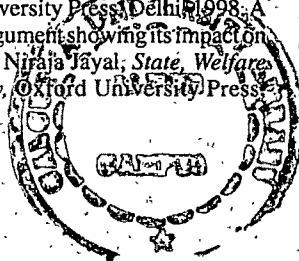
During Shah Bano, an occasion for discussion and debate amongst Indian Muslims, Congress did what it had always done: allied with ortho-

doxy. This alliance of Congress with religious conservatism has historically been very deep. It is an alliance that makes sense only in terms of Congress' perpetual need to identify and support unified community interests. You can make entire communities of voters dependent upon you only if there are community interests in the first place. Congress has favoured an idiom of politics in which group interests continue to be reinforced by the work of politics. It eventually was put on the defensive by the most virulent idiom in which the politics of group identity can be carried out: Hindu nationalism.

**M**any have argued that there is a lesson to be learnt in Togadia's arrest in Rajasthan. The whole affair turned out to be a damp squib. Togadia and the VHP were not able to mobilize much support. If you combine this fact with the Congress' victory in the elections in Himachal, you could argue that Hindutva is running out of steam. But this would be a premature conclusion. First, nobody has ever argued that Indian politics at any time is just about Hindutva; that religious and communal issues exhaust the discourse of politics. This would be as foolish a position as suggesting that Hindutva has no purchase on politics whatsoever. Indeed, economic discontent, anti-incumbency sentiment may very well allow the Congress to do better at the next election. But the long term prospects for Hindutva cannot be inferred from one election or two.

Second, even if the BJP loses, Hindutva could triumph. After all, from Jayalalitha to Digvijay Singh, a much wider constituency is doing Hindutva's work for it on issues like conversion, cow slaughter and privileging an idiom of majority sentiment in politics. Third, Indian politics

1. The best argument showing how damaging the reification of groups for secularism has been is Gurpreet Mahajan, *Rights and Identities*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1998. A very effective argument showing its impact on democracy is in Niraja Jayal, *State, Welfare and Democracy*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 2000.



gets polarized around Hindutva when there is either a mobilization push by Sangh Parivar cadres or when there is a series of precipitating events that give the Parivar an opening, or both. In Gujarat, Godhra, Akshardham and terrorism elsewhere provided the backdrop that fuelled a politics of anxiety. It is too soon to confidently say that these conditions will not obtain in the near future. Will Congress under those conditions have the strength, courage and imagination to counter Hindutva or will it once again waver and cave in? Togadia's arrest notwithstanding, it is too soon to tell.

Politics is about imaginatively crafting social coalitions. In the politics of identity, caste or religion are two idioms by which political parties have crafted coalitions. Their logic then determines the manner in which differences are accommodated. Both these idioms have serious limitations; and at this historical juncture, Congress will be severely disadvantaged if these idioms come to dominate our politics. Congress, at least in North India, unless it crafts alliances, will not make a huge dent in Dalit, OBC votes. And Congress is doomed if the politics of anxiety that marks Hindutva dominates our political landscape.

Its best bet, therefore, is to reinvent itself: throw cold water on communal politics rather than opening up new spaces for it, and imaginatively think of an economic and social agenda that can be the basis of a sustainable new social coalition consistent with the economic demands of our times. And it will once again have to think of itself as a party, not always on the defensive, but as a party of transformation, committed to emancipating the state from religion and religion from the state. But this requires leadership, organization, imaginative ideology and a little patience, all of which are currently in short supply.



# Challenging Hindutva

JYOTIRMAYA SHARMA

TO explain the current situation of the Congress, it is worth recounting an apocryphal story about Emperor Akbar's favourite elephant. When the royal pachyderm died, his keepers could not muster the courage to convey the sad news to Akbar. They feared his wrath. One day the emperor asked after his elephant. 'He does not move, and has been rejecting food and drink,' reported the mahaavat. 'Is he ill?' asked Akbar. 'He does not breathe either,' said the elephant keeper. 'Then is he dead?' thundered the emperor. 'How can I have the temerity to say such a thing, Your Excellency,' replied the poor mahaavat. In other words, the Congress is dead. It may not be dead according to the calculations of political analysts or psephologists, but as a credible counter to the politics of jihadi Hindutva of the sangh parivar variety it is ineffective, unimaginative and irrelevant.

It would not be an exaggeration to suggest that the Congress was the midwife that delivered jihadi Hindutva. The eventual success of Hindutva in independent India is a

direct result of the failure of successive Congress governments to deliver the promises of governance and the accompanying failure to build a set of viable, popular and participatory liberal-democratic institutions. This is the primary premise on which jihadi Hindutva argues its case. Not that it has an alternative to governance or institution building. Rather, it argues in favour of a strong, macho state that does not necessarily deliver the goods of well-being and prosperity, but offers hope and optimism in the fashion of most millennial sects.

Jihadi Hindutva posits a notion of cultural nationalism that has a far reaching emotive appeal to a vast majority of people who find the Congress' idea of territorial nationalism difficult to handle. The latter requires faith in the nation as an artificial, formal and impersonal construct. In sharp contrast, jihadi Hindutva rallies its allegiance to obsolete, yet potent, cultural symbols such as Ramjanmabhoomi and trishuls.

More importantly, the success of the sangh parivar lies in its deft play

of the politics of friend and foe. This brand of politics is simplistic and has little respect for nuances such as the Constitution, liberal debate and democracy. It draws strength from a constant preoccupation with correcting real or perceived wrongs and constantly 'creating' new foes. Short-term goals such as economic prosperity, law and order, forms and procedure are sacrificed at the altar of the urgent need to tackle external and internal enemies. These enemies have an uncanny tendency to proliferate. The energies of the entire nation ought always to be primarily geared towards this goal. Indira Gandhi gave birth to this idea in India and the sangh parivar has merely perfected it.

**O**n the aesthetic plane, jihadi Hindutva represents moronism at its best. It tends towards mediocrity, favours moral sanctimoniousness over rational conversation, and displays an overwhelming tendency to look forward to the past. Elements such as discussion and debate belong to the liberal idea which assumes a world of opposing interests, differences and egos. It lies in the belief that a degree of civic peace can be found through an unrestrained clash of opinion and that competition at all levels will ultimately produce harmony. Today, both the sangh parivar and the Congress no longer believe in persuading opponents of the truth or justice of an opinion, but rather pre-occupy themselves with fabricating a majority in Parliament to govern.

The other crucial principle that the Congress embraced in 1947 was democracy. In theory, the idea is one of an identity of the governed and governing. This entailed a principle of unity which declared the community of men, free and equal. The liberty of the individual and his rights were placed in the forefront, while com-

pletely integrating him into the sovereign nation. In other words, the final integration of India was achieved not through an organic growth preserving the historical individuality of the component parts, but by abstract thought setting out to build on a non-historical basis.

**S**ocieties that are democratically organized do so in the name of 'the people', which is again an abstraction. In truth, the masses are sociologically and psychologically heterogeneous. To the people, once identified with a locality, customs, observances and traditions, a non-territorial and ahistorical identity is ascribed. This is the idea of nationality without the political influence of history. For a people rooted in the soil of a nation, there is a certain hierarchy of allegiances—to their village, community, district, 'desh'. In contrast, there is an uncanny likeness between the nation state and the modern city. Both are founded on human beings growing up, anonymously, losing identity and becoming regimented. Inherited beliefs get displaced, old ties break, and there is constant uncertainty, fear and an ever growing sense of void.

To master these, there usually ensues a proud assertion of a glorious past, illusions of national grandeur and claims to racial and moral superiority. The sangh parivar's brand of jihadi Hindutva takes its cue from this sense of alienation and dislocation in society. The solution they offer are centralization and moral and racial superiority. The first step in this process is the conscious depreciation of other peoples. The self-appointed apostles of an exalted creed, then, burn humans, places of worship, films and books. A consciousness of power, which is a substitute for freedom, comes in the form of violence of one kind or the other. The song and cere-

mony of the complex fabric of liberal institutions comes face to face with the fact that the majority, in the name of representing the will of the people, can crush the minority.

To make this agenda effective, outfits like the sangh parivar rush, first and foremost, to control the means with which the will of the people is likely to be constructed: military and political force, propaganda, control of the press, popular education and schools. In this sense, the caste-marked Murli Manohar Joshis of the world are the first crusaders and apostles of such an ideology.

**A**nother striking feature of jihadi Hindutva has been to shift the emphasis from the idea of superficial political equality to the preponderance of economic and technical organisational solutions to social conflicts. The liberal edifice is dismissed as a monopoly of the discussing classes. This logic substitutes the idea of majority with that of power, dismissing arguments about voting percentages as the indulgence of psephologists. They argue that the will of the out-voted is in truth identical with the will of those in power, while the latter invariably claim the 'majority' to be on their side. This is what Narendra Modi claimed after his win in the assembly elections recently: He represented the Muslims as well as the Hindus.

To understand the mind of the sangh parivar and jihadi Hindutva is, therefore, to comprehend the witches' brew of nationalism, democratic majoritarianism and dissolution of the liberal polity into an everlasting discussion of cultural and philosophical-historical commonplaces. Instead of policy, discussion and execution, the nation today is preoccupied overtime in discussing 'Truth', whether it be that of the birthplace of Lord Rama or the virtues of banning cow slaughter.

The Congress has little to offer here as an alternative. It has selectively flirted with the very elements that constitute the core of jihadi Hindutva.

As a counter to Hindutva, it offers soft Hindutva. To counter communalism, it offers secular essentialism and cultural neutrality. Its answer to the politics of friend and foe is merely creating its own rogue's gallery. It hopes to fight identity politics with meaningless internationalism. Worse still, it hopes to match the sangh parivar's nostalgia about a lost golden age with an indeterminate future. Hindutva's anti-elitism is countered by lip service to meritocracy.

**W**hat the Congress requires is an alternative metaphysics, not an alternative political ideology. It needs to restate the idea of India afresh for itself. In the 20th century, the Mahatma did this for them. The problem with the Congress is that it has ceased to think through the larger question of the idea of India, nor does it have the instrumentality to do so. In contrast, the sangh parivar does have an idea of India, however pernicious and flawed. It needs a metaphysics, not merely because it has turned weedy and unwieldy, but also because its language, symbols and figures of thought have little to do with embeddedness in Indian reality. In the place of an intellectual core, it only has mediocre newspaper columnists, failed journalists, chiffon socialists and a medley of non-descript socialites.

One historical figure that troubles the votaries of jihadi Hindutva more than anyone else is Lord Buddha. Savarkar attributed India's decline and degeneration to Buddhism. Vivekananda and Aurobindo had a love-hate relation with the Enlightened One. The centre of this discomfort is the Buddha's denial of the existence

of God and of the soul, his ethics of non-violence and universal brotherhood, his rejection of caste and privilege, his indictment of brahminical Hinduism, his distaste for rituals and, most importantly, his all-embracing love for all beings. The Mahatma once represented the best in Buddhism in his life and work, but is now sadly associated with the discredited past of the Congress. So, it doesn't help the Congress much to resurrect the Mahatma.

**W**ithout too great an emphasis on *dukkha*, the Congress needs to latch on to the central tenets of Buddhism and restate them as their alternative metaphysics. The core of this would be the idea of love and equality. This forms the basis for a lot of new age sects as well. Love sells. Love communicates. Love as care, love as reaching out to people, love as an active interest in the welfare of others has greater power than say a bhagwati jagaran. Love is unselfish. It transcends race, caste and nationality without compromising on a basic core of ethics. That is what the Buddha preached and this is what made the likes of Savarkar deeply uncomfortable.

In doing so, they must not 'secularise' this to the extent that love, compassion, empathy, equality and care become mere slogans. The challenge is to keep intact the ethical, moral and emotional core of the message of Buddha while working towards transforming society. After all, the Buddha too was confronted by a similar set of considerations when he proposed his world-view. The jihadi Hindutva of today is not very dissimilar from the *karma-kanda* driven, priest-dominated faith that the Buddha challenged. He succeeded once. There is no reason he cannot succeed a second time.

# Ensuring good neighbourliness

J. N. DIXIT

THE vision and policies of the Indian National Congress towards South Asia can be traced to the pre-independence era, particularly from the 2nd to the 4th decade of the last century. This vision and policies have undergone transformation over the last 56 years in response to political, economic and technological developments in the South Asian region. The changing nature of inter-state equations in South Asia and the patterns of great power influence on the countries of this region, also impacted on the policies and vision of the Congress Party. It is obvious that these undercurrents and influences are not a static phenomenon.

The vision and policies of the Congress Party regarding our proximate neighbourhood acquired added importance because the party remained more or less continuously in power from 1946 to 1996. So the vision and policies were not only those of the

political party but also of the government of the Republic, constituting the foundation of India's regional relations, regional security policies and policies related to various aspects of regional cooperation.

Before proceeding to a chronological analysis and assessment of the party's South Asian vision and policies, it is pertinent to spell out how they are critical to internal governance in India. Nation states in our region from Pakistan to Bangladesh and from Bangladesh to Sri Lanka and Maldives constitute a somewhat unique geo-social, geo-ethnic, geo-religious and geo-linguistic area. In many ways the region had a unified subcontinental identity for nearly 200 years before it divided itself into independent nation states. Out of the seven countries in the region, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Maldives were part of a unified British governmental jurisdic-

tion; Nepal and Bhutan, though with differing identities, were integral parts of the political arrangements of the British imperium. Political interaction in the subcontinental region was, therefore, a generally unified and orchestrated phenomenon under colonial rule.

The osmosis of history made India central to the processes of South Asia's political, strategic, economic and demographic developments because of its territorial size, population, diversities, economic strength, technological capacities and military power. Geography contributed to the process. The borders of other South Asian nation states touch India's frontiers. None of them however have a direct land, marine or river border with each other. India shares ethnicities, languages, religions and cultural traditions with all the other states of the South Asian region.

**T**his overlapping creates a substantive negative challenge to India's relations with its South Asian neighbours. Given the asymmetry of India and its neighbours which are smaller, these countries feel that their separate identities, even if they are not absorbed into larger identity of India, can be overwhelmed by those ingredients of Indian national identity which constitute the fundamental elements of the national identity of other South Asian countries, whether in terms of religion, language and ethnic-cultural factors.

It is due to this political chemistry that instability or crises within India in the processes of internal governance can generate profound apprehensions among India's neighbours. India's policies and attitudes towards its neighbours are an equally impactful factor, affecting the stability, sense of security and the processes of national consolidation in other countries of the

South Asian region. Some elaboration of this assessment is necessary.

Physical proximity invariably results in interaction. This, however, need not necessarily be positive in content. Interaction can be negative, even adversarial, as our experience has shown. In the course of time, the futility and wastage of an adversarial relationship will be realised by countries in South Asia as revealed by experience and developments in different parts of the world, especially since the early 1970s, when there was a thaw in the Cold War culminating in a total transformation of the global scenario after 1987.

The point is that the geographical parameters of regional or subregional cooperation are not determined by logic or public perceptions about national or regional boundaries, but by political inclinations and economic requirements. In this context, there is ambiguity in defining the South Asian region. The enthusiasm and willingness of various countries to be part of a South Asian arrangement, therefore, depends more on economic and political considerations. Pakistan wants to be part of West Asia! Bangladesh and Sri Lanka wanted to be part of South East Asia at some points of time.

**I**n addition, there is a dichotomy between the size of the national economies of the region and their resource and technological bases. In this context, India falls in a category by itself. Pakistan and Bangladesh have large economies in terms of geography and population. In contrast, Bhutan and Nepal have unidimensional smaller economies. Sri Lanka has developed a more diversified economy.

Ethno-cultural affinity or similarity could provide intellectual, emotional and social impetus to regional cooperation. There are both positive and negative elements affecting this

factor in South Asia. Linguistic, ethnic, religious and cultural traits of the people of South Asia transcend the national frontiers of the seven member countries. Peoples of these countries also share the same religions. All this should be a potent impulse for cooperation.

Paradoxically, it is the very commonality of the ethno-cultural and religious heritage that has created problems about national political identity amongst India's neighbours, especially Pakistan and more recently Bangladesh. Despite a shared socio-cultural and religious inheritance, the assertion of a separate political identity necessitates and results in countries in the region pulling back from processes of economic and socio-cultural cooperation. The apprehension of being merged with or marginalized by India remains an obstacle in the process of consolidating regional cooperation.

**W**hile these are the abiding predicaments in India's interaction with its South Asian neighbours, the awareness about these predicaments in fashioning our regional foreign policy emerged only from the period when Rajiv Gandhi became the prime minister towards the end of 1984. The previous three and a half decades were underpinned by a different vision and consequently regional policy orientations. The phenomenon was rooted in the ethos of the Congress Party and the freedom struggle.

Most of Asia barring Japan was under colonial and imperial rule till the end of the Second World War. There were nascent freedom movements in all Asian countries especially in what is today the South Asian region. The Indian freedom movement and the socio-cultural renaissance of the late 19th and early 20th century generated by Indian intellectuals led to the world's largest, vibrant and active

freedom movement created and conducted by the Indian National Congress.

Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru were of the view that India could not achieve independence in isolation. They considered the Indian freedom struggle to be both a part of, and a catalyst for, the struggle for independence from colonialism and imperial rule of other countries in the Asian region. They felt that India should both energise and participate in the parallel struggles for freedom going on in other parts of Asia, stretching from Indonesia in the South, to the Gulf and West Asia in the North.

As a consequence, leaders of the INC established contact with leaders of the freedom movements of other Asian countries from the late '20s of the last century. Jawaharlal Nehru's participation in the Conference of Oppressed Nationalities in Brussels in 1927 was the first watershed in the process, after which contacts with leaders of the freedom movements of Asian countries were maintained more or less on a continuous basis right up to the point when India achieved independence in 1947.

**T**here was a background to this internationalism in India's foreign policy orientations. It is generally forgotten that the INC organised a boycott of Japanese goods and sent a medical mission to China under Dr Kotnis in support of Chinese people's resistance against Japanese aggression. India's response to the Balfour Declaration aimed at displacing the Palestinian Arabs from their homeland was to give full support to the Palestinian people long before Israel came into existence. The Tripura session of the Indian National Congress in 1939 affirmed in a resolution that world peace and progress depended on the imperative destruction of Nazism and Fascism.

Jawaharlal Nehru summed up both the vision and the policy outlook of India when he declared in 1942: 'In India you and I are working for our own freedom. But we are thinking not of freeing India alone. We envisage a free and independent India that will work for the freedom of all the countries.'

What then were the attitudes and foreign policy orientations of India in 1946? At the intellectual and psychological levels, there was a profound sense of collective identity and definite recognition of a collective sense of self about India as a country which would support and encourage freedom struggles of all other countries. The geographical size, the demographic and natural resources of India were considered contributory factors to India's importance and its international role for the above purpose.

**T**his sense of importance was accentuated by a pride in India's civilizational past. The moral high ground and assumption of an international role of India stated by figures such as Swami Vivekananda and Mahatma Gandhi influenced articulate sections of the Indian public opinion giving them a perception of India's role with a missionary purpose in the international community. India was envisioned as a messenger of peace and as a catalyst for creating a just and moral world order.

This vision also involved a conviction that India's influence need not be based on military power or economic riches. A commitment to freedom based on commitment to democracy, predicated on safeguarding diversity and individual freedoms in civil societies were the terms of reference of India's vision and foreign policy orientations. Encouraging cooperative relationships and impulses of democracy were the terms of reference for international relations. Democracy,

peaceful resolution of issues, economic cooperation aimed at the well-being of peoples of Asia, respect for human rights, categorical opposition to imperialism, colonialism and all forms of discrimination, and strengthening political multilateralism through the UN, were the basic principles of the Indian vision which was translated into India's regional foreign policy, particularly during the first decade after independence till early '60s. The Congress, both as the supreme national political party and as the party governing India, was the conceiver and implementor of this vision and policy.

The first step towards assuming the catalytic and leadership role was taken by convening the Asian Relations Conference in Delhi on 23 March 1947. Political leaders from practically all Asian countries, most of them still under foreign rule, attended this conference. The indivisibility of peace, security and development in the international context was categorically asserted by Jawaharlal Nehru. Speaking at this conference Nehru said: 'Peace can only come when all countries are free and also when human beings everywhere have freedom, security and opportunity. Peace and freedom therefore have to be considered both in their political and economic aspects.'

**T**wo additional ingredients in the vision and policies were secularism (separation of religion from politics) and not joining either bloc engaged in the Cold War. Congress's hope was that newly emerging independent states of Asia would be democratic, avoid religious extremism and be resistant to centrifugal ethnic, linguistic or religious impulses in their societies which could erode the composite cultural, multi-ethnic and territorial identities of the nation states in South Asia. These diversities were a basic

characteristic of all the countries in the South Asian region.

India's approach was to uphold diversity and plurality in all nation states. Rejecting, and expecting other Asian countries to reject, participation in the Cold War had a rationale. The disintegration of the alliance between 'democratic' and the 'progressive' forces resulting in the Cold War between western democracies and East European countries led by the Soviet Union were disappointments to the Congress and the Government of India. Congress leadership legitimately became apprehensive about India becoming subject to extraneous external influences if India and other countries were to take sides in this ideological confrontation.

Nehru's view was that India and other neighbouring countries should keep away from Cold War power politics, remain committed to their own democratic terms of reference for national consolidation, and cooperate with all countries regardless of their respective ideological and political affiliations in order to maintain regional and international peace and meet their respective national interests. It is this approach which evolved into non-alignment and ultimately became the Non-aligned Movement. India decided to not only become non-aligned itself but desired other South Asian countries, if not all the Asian countries, to be non-aligned in their foreign policies. This was not just a vision but also the operational orientation of India's foreign policy in regional and global terms.

**T**here was also the feeling that India had a leadership role at the regional level on contemporaneous politico-cultural grounds because Congress under Nehru felt that it had a moral stance in international politics. The reasons on the basis of which we pre-

sumed a leadership role for ourselves were: India being the first country among the former colonies to achieve freedom and India's active support to other freedom struggles in Asia resulted in the success of the latter. India expected to be a focus of attention and a reference point of all policies and attitudes of other Asian countries.

**S**econd, Congress presumed that India's contributions to the culture and civilization of other Asian countries constituted a linkage with these countries because of which they would look up to India as a point of origin of the socio-cultural foundations of their respective national identities and that this linkage would form the terms of reference of their domestic and foreign policies. The spread of major spiritual and religious thought and resulting cultural movements throughout Asia mostly occurred through the subcontinental land mass. This phenomenon merited a special position for India in the post-colonial period amongst the independent countries which broke out of the thrall of colonialism.

India undoubtedly succeeded in this role in the Asian region till the Bandung Conference of 1955. India supported the freedom struggle of Indonesia, Myanmar and Sri Lanka. Despite the war with Pakistan on Kashmir in 1948, minimum levels of equilibrium and stability were maintained in India-Pakistan relations. India was not just a superior but an active participant in the freeing of Nepal from the despotic rule of the Ranas. India forged a more moderate and egalitarian relationship with Bhutan, moving away from pattern of relations which the British Indian government had with these states.

India's Asian vision and policies unravelled, perhaps disintegrated, when India suffered a military defeat

by China in the boundary war of 1962. The first negative indications of regional responses to India's vision and policies were revealed during the Bandung Conference in 1955. The Chinese and Sri Lankan (then Ceylon) delegations expressed resentment about the didactic role sought to be played by India to shape the Cold War world. A deeper analysis of this resentment and later developments reveals that Jawaharlal Nehru's vision and approach was perhaps innocent of the realities of inter-state relations, India not having much direct experience of realpolitik and complex strategic predicaments which nation states face had an idealistic approach towards security and power equations.

**A**t the time of achieving independence India did not face any major threat to its territorial integrity or security. The first presumption was that since India had no expansionist or aggressive designs against any other country, it would not face any threats. Second, that since it was not taking sides in the Cold War and wanted friendly relations with all countries, Cold War equations would not have any negative implications for India. The third assessment was that the just political and moral terms of reference adopted by the leading powers at the end of the Second World War, leading to the establishment of the UN, provided a moral and procedural basis for resolving conflicts and tensions through negotiations and peaceful means on the merits of the points or disputes at issue.

The manner in which the Kashmir war was dealt with by the United Nations was the first lesson that India learnt that her predications mentioned above were not valid. Curiously and mistakenly, India also felt self-confident about itself as an inheritor of the British position of power in South

Asia, which was not so in reality. We had given ourselves a democratic republican constitution. Britain accepting India as a member of Commonwealth despite India declaring herself a Republic, created an illusion of Indian indispensability in the international scheme of things. A stable administration and a standing army, particularly the latter having been part of the victorious allied forces in the Second World War, instilled in India a feeling that she should be considered a power to be reckoned with in Asia, especially in South Asian affairs. Since at that time our resources were better, both qualitatively and quantitatively, in relation to other countries in the region, there was certain complacency about security and strategic matters in our minds.

This sense of complacency or security as well as the expectation that South Asian countries would share the ideological and political orientations in their foreign policies as envisaged by the Congress, remained unfulfilled. This happened due to a number of reasons which are worth a recall.

**P**akistan as well as most South Asian countries joined the western powers in the Cold War. Pakistan and these countries became part of the system of military alliances forged by the United States against the Soviet Union and China from Baghdad to Bangkok (CENTO and SEATO). Nearer home, Pakistan signed separate agreements of defence and for defence supplies with the United States in 1954-55.

Second, China's defeating India during the 1962 border war qualitatively diminished India's credibility as an Asian power. The shattering of Sino-Indian relations and Pakistan's forging of military and political alliances with China signalled the elemental realities of power policies and national interests being more influen-

tial governing factors in the Asian region. It also signalled the breakdown of a vision of Asian unity, harmony and resurgence which had animated India's foreign policy.

Two wars with Pakistan, in 1965 and 1971, diminished the prospects of South Asian cooperation and at the same time destroyed the two-nation theory on the basis of which Pakistan was created. Ethno-linguistic centrifugal forces now emerged in the civil societies of South Asian countries. These phenomena changed the vision and policies of secularism and sanctity of pluralistic nation states envisaged by India as a cornerstone of its regional policy.

**P**resident Zia-ur-Rehman of Bangladesh took an initiative in January 1981 to counter the tensions and contradictions affecting inter-state relations in the South Asian region by suggesting the creation of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). India's initial response was that this could be an exercise of the smaller neighbours joining or ganging up to generate pressures on disputes which they had with India. It, nevertheless, joined the Association which was formally inaugurated in December 1985. The Association was to avoid discussion of bilateral controversies and disputes. Member states were to focus on bilateral and multi-lateral cooperation in economic, technological, cultural and social spheres.

SAARC has been in existence now for nearly 18 years. India genuinely wanted this regional grouping to be an instrumentality to decrease tension, increase cooperation and to create stability in and between South Asian states.

The Congress as the ruling party wanted to specially encourage economic cooperation and trade, which could lead to the creation of a South

Asian Preferential Trade Arrangement, climaxing with the creation of a South Asian Economic Community. Progress could not be made in this regard because of Pakistan's insistence that it would not join the effort unless the Kashmir issue was solved to its satisfaction and the somewhat unilateral commercial and economic demands of countries like Bangladesh and Nepal. This situation continues as a existentialist reality. The idealistic vision of creating a harmonious South Asian region in India's foreign policy has undergone qualitative transformation responsive to the evolving realities over the last two and half decades beginning from the mid-70s of the last century.

**T**he pluralistic nation states of South Asia are all subject to centrifugal ethno-linguistic and subnational pressures affecting their unity and stability. Bhutan is afflicted by the tension between its Nepalese and Bhutanese nationals. Nepal faces the increasing presence of Muslims from different parts of the subcontinent. Bangladesh is ill at ease with its large Hindu minority. Pakistan is subject to cogitational aspirations of the Pathans, Baluchis, Sindhis and Mohajirs resenting the domination of Punjabis in Pakistani politics. Sri Lanka suffers from a two-decade long separatist movement of Tamils against the Sinhalese. Even Maldives has been subject to coups against President Gayoom's long rule. India's trials and tribulations in this respect, whether they are about Jammu and Kashmir or the North East, need no elaboration.

Tensions raised by this phenomenon create difficulties in inter-state relations but equally important generate instabilities in each of the states of the region, affecting governance and development. The original vision of the Congress of national consolida-



tion of the states of the region based on harmonious relations, meaningful cooperation and collective success in development, has now been replaced by the need of crisis management, preservation of the diversities and pluralities of the nation states in the region and the prevention of centrifugal forces in one country generating disturbances and instability in the other countries, especially in India because of the point made earlier. That is of India's neighbours having overlapping ethnic, linguistic and religious identities with people of India.

**T**he task has become more difficult for the Congress because of the narrow Hindutva-centric ideologies and orientations of the BJP-led government which has generated criticism, apprehensions and resentment amongst India's neighbours where civil societies are not characterised by large Hindu minorities (except in Nepal). The Congress vision of upholding diversities and pluralities as a cementing factor in different nation states of South Asia is subject to challenge. Coping with this challenge involves the first step of restoring the secular, pluralistic terms of reference as an operational force of political process and governance within India. Only after restoring this inner cohesion can India influence its neighbours to orient their policies on positive lines of political harmony overarching the social, cultural and linguistic diversities of their respective civil societies.

The other realities to be taken cognition of are the nuclear weaponisation of India and Pakistan, problems related to the sharing of water and energy resources, the threat of trans-border terrorism and religious fanaticism, and the demographic pressures on land in different states of the region leading to the phenomenon of illegal migration, given the spiralling popu-

lations. Overarching these predicaments, current and prospective, are the trends generated by a unipolar world dominated by the USA.

**G**iven the prospect of a Pax Americana primarily geared to the national interests of the United States regardless of its implications for other countries and an absence of a balancing force in world order, there is need to structure political and strategic equations with other nation states who share India's concerns about a unipolar world and have levels of economic political and military power, which in combination with other like-minded countries can become a balancing factor.

The vision of the Congress Party and its policies is in the process of fashioning a response to the above challenges. There must be some crystallisation of this required vision and terms of reference of regional policies by the time the next general elections in India are held in 2004. One cannot be didactic or prescriptive about what the vision should be or what orientations the policy should take, but some fundamental considerations which should influence the vision and policies can be stated.

Cohesiveness in terms of the institutional framework of the power of the region, shared ideas about the organisation of government and shared values about shaping the political system of countries in the region add to the prospects of cooperation. We in South Asia, have to strive towards realising this cohesion.

The most important consideration impinging on regional or sub-regional cooperation in any part of the world is a commonality of perceptions concerning the manner in which regional stability can be ensured, and a shared approach to strategic and security issues affecting the region. Objec-

tivity requires that India clinically analyse the attitude of its neighbours towards it while deciding on the manner and extent to which it should participate in the regional cooperative effort. While Bhutan and Nepal have no palpable reservations about India in matters relating to strategic and security concerns, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka do. Whether or not these reservations and concerns on their part are valid or justified is beside the point.

It follows, therefore, that until a number of complex bilateral political issues between India and its neighbours are resolved, these countries will continue to look for balancing equations with other countries outside the region and, to that extent, their willingness to participate in the regional cooperation effort will be both limited and inhibited in the foreseeable future.

**P**rospects of security have to be assessed in a comprehensive manner, both in terms of the security concerns of individual states and in the regional context. While security concerns of the individual states may be rooted in the nature of inter-state relations within the region and in the political and territorial issues which stand unresolved, countries of South Asia face a number of challenges in terms of broader issues.

Traditionally, states have been inclined to deal with security issues by political or diplomatic tactics that are competitive or confrontational, or through the application of incrementally coercive force culminating in military force. But if people in South Asian countries through a process of political education and enlightenment are persuaded to move away from norms of confrontation and application of coercive force, a more creative system of managing both national and regional security could be forged. A beginning can be made in areas of

security that are not subject to direct competitive political or territorial threat perceptions.

Threats from political/ideological factors, security against supra-national integration, threats to society and law and order from fundamentalist forces form part of political security. They need to be examined in their local, regional and global security dimensions. Is there a possibility of such threats getting out of hand and becoming a security risk of a high order? Can regional mobilisation take place against the threat of a state's destabilisation through political subversion.

**P**olitical compulsions affect the prospects of South Asian security negatively. First and foremost is the asymmetry between India and its South Asian neighbours in terms of demography, natural resources levels of economic development, technological capacities and military strength. India has to make a special effort to remedy the threat perceptions amongst its neighbours, which are a logical consequence of this asymmetry. Second, nuclear weaponisation of India and Pakistan has profoundly affected the security environment of the region, not only in terms of regional security perceptions but also in terms of the strategic response of important nuclear powers like the US, the Russian Federation and China.

It is important that India and Pakistan undertake early negotiations within the framework of the Lahore Memorandum of February 1999 to formulate proposals for mutual nuclear restraint and to implement them. It is also essential that India structure a relationship with China, Russia and the US to stabilise the strategic environment in the context of the nuclear weaponisation of the region. The influence that these important countries

can exert on Pakistan to come to an understanding with India on this specific issue is, and should remain, a matter of high priority.

Threats from cross-border terrorism, narco crimes, violent religious extremism and so on, pose a common challenge to all South Asian countries including Pakistan. A systematic and continuous effort should be made to forge inter-state South Asian regional cooperation to counter and eliminate these threats.

The demographic pressure on land in all the countries of the region will generate migration which individual governments may not be able to contain in the coming decades. This can create social tensions and economic instability if not managed through mutual cooperation. It would be pertinent for our governments to initiate early discussions to make arrangements for an economic community and an integrated economic region that would enable travel, free movement of goods and services and the movement of peoples on the basis of consent and cooperation within the region for specific periods for specific socio-economic purposes.

**T**he South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation should revise its agenda and charter to facilitate discussions on all political, economic and territorial issues that create tensions between countries of the region. The terms of reference for discussing these issues should be calibrated in a manner where unity and territorial integrity of individual states of the region are not challenged in the process. The objective should be limited to examining possible compromises without affecting the vital interests of SAARC members, and to acknowledging the fact that there will be differences of perceptions between different countries on these vital interests.

Broadening the agenda of SAARC to cover collective security issues and institutionally strengthening the organisation to galvanise co-operation between South Asian states are objectives which should be seriously adopted by member states to ensure durable security in the region.

The South Asia experiment in the creation and consolidation of nation states has different origins, different impulses and different limitations. South Asian nation states originated from the processes of imperial consolidation of the colonial period. Each such state had a plural ethnic, religious and linguistic demography that is in the process of being cemented through comparatively new concepts of national identity. The limitations are many, more so because what South Asia is trying to do in a span of 50 or 10 years was done in Europe over a period of nearly three and a half centuries.

**I**n fact, South Asian nation states are subject to a profound contradiction. Their collective historical memory is one of fragmented ethno-linguistic and religious societies, with smaller territorial identities being overcome by imperial integration and colonial rule. So, the impulse is towards the creation of strong nation states. On the other hand, ethnic, cultural linguistic and religious identities have the strength of tradition and history that transcend the emergence of nation states on the international scene. These identities have reinvigorated in the new atmosphere of freedom and self-rule that has characterised South Asia since the end of the World War II. There are situations where the impulses toward building a strong nation state are challenged by narrower aspirations of ethnic and sub-national identities.

That is the contradiction that the South Asian states and people have to resolve now.

# Reloading the family matrix

HARISH KHARE

*Like a shopkeeper in an Indian bazaar, it (the Congress) squats with its large, flabby shape in the middle of its wares, the heart of a political market place in which bargaining and dissent are the language of the discourse.*

W.H. Morris-Jones, 1966

*The party (the Congress) is held together largely by opportunism – by the power, patronage and money that public office can command. No longer an organisation of continuous activity, it has become an electoral machine to be activated periodically for the campaign.*

Robert Hardgrave and Stanley Kochanek, 1986

*Till a few years ago, critics of the Congress Party would scoff that the Congress is not a political party but an election machine. Now, the Congress seems to have ceased being even that.*

A.K. Antony Report, 2000

ONE has to be a Congress buff to have noticed that 14 March 2003 came and went without the AICC establishment acknowledging the importance of the date. Indeed the party has deliberately refused to attribute any significance to the day. This non-acknowledgement is most incongruous in a political party that thrives on an elaborate celebration

of the past. For the uninitiated, on 14 March 2003 Sonia Gandhi completed five years as the Congress president; an occasion, by any yardstick, to be remembered and celebrated.

Yet, in a collective conspiracy of silence, the day was allowed to pass off unheralded. Perhaps there hangs a tale. And it is this tale that tells us as much about the organizational culture as also about the great mystery as to why the Congress has not been able to reinvent itself as party that is capable of answering the needs and the yearning of a changed and changing India.

On 14 March 1998 the Sonia Gandhi partisans, let it be recalled, had staged a bloodless coup; the party's elected president, Sitaram Kesri was thrown out lock, stock and barrel. Sonia Gandhi was proclaimed as the Congress President. It was claimed that the party had been purged of its recently acquired unnaturalness: the usurpers – non-Nehru-Gandhi family leaders, Narasimha Rao and Sitaram Kesri – had been scratched from the

escutcheon, and now the leadership had been restored to its natural and only claimants: the Nehru-Gandhi family.

There was much celebration; this stage-managed euphoria notwithstanding, those who participated in this unprecedented conspiracy – the new leader and the her plotters – were mindful of the grand organizational sin they had committed. Each one of them knew that the deposed president had been elected only less than a year ago in a democratically contested election, the first of its kind in more than two decades. The coup had abruptly stopped the party's gradual rediscovery of democratic ways of conducting its internal affairs. That day the Congress opted to move against the grain of a democratic India.

**O**n 14 March 1998 the legitimacy of the democratic leadership was deemed to be dispensable in favour of the dynastic claims of a family, undoubtedly a remarkably dominant, domineering and demanding family. The family had over the decades weaned a whole generation – in fact, two generations – of Congressmen away from rigours of internal democracy. The 1991-1998 interlude found the party fumbling its 'liberation' from the family. Now the family was back with a vengeance.

Sonia Gandhi had no claim to any kind of political apprenticeship and her only qualification for the leadership of the Congress party was that she was married into the Nehru-Gandhi family. On her part, she took up the leadership burden as a kind of noblesse oblige; the rest of the leadership crowd, each with calculations of his/her own, sought to renew faith in one of the most enduring (though a carefully cultivated) political myths in India: the Nehru-Gandhi family is divinely gifted with shamanistic qualities.

From day one, Sonia Gandhi was piled up with the dynasty's cult of leadership: only a Nehru-Gandhi family person had charisma, only a political legatee of Indira Gandhi could command an all-India appeal, presence and name-recognition, and only a nominee of the Nehru-Gandhi family could restore order among Congressmen, otherwise prone to fractiousness and divisions.

14 March 1998 thus became the defining moment for the relationship between the leadership and the rest of the Congress. Here was the world's oldest political organization collectively and willingly renouncing democratic principles as the basis of its internal arrangements and, instead, opting for a quintessentially feudal order. Whatever the trappings of subsequent 'democratic' electoral exercises, the fundamental nature of the party remains unchanged – a Nehru-Gandhi claimant sitting, unchallenged, at the top. The most natural order of things, with all the embellishments of organizational modernity. For better or for worse, the party would be given no other leadership choice, and its leaders must reconcile to this format. The only alternative to Sonia Gandhi would be her children; you, dear Congressman, are free to exercise your democratic choice between the daughter or the son. The top leadership was not negotiable, nor questionable, nor accountable.

**T**o be fair, Sonia Gandhi's record since the March 1998 coup has not been all that dismal. It can certainly be argued that her presence at the top has prevented fragmentation of the party. With her as the party's mascot, the Congress has been able to reclaim its natural political space in state after state, though only those states which operate a two-party system, and today the party can boast of being in power

in about fifteen states. These successes at the state level have helped the party assert its national presence in a rather efficacious manner. The party is the natural choice for all those individuals who feel ill at home with the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance, for instance, Shankersinh Vaghela of Gujarat. After the 1998 assembly elections in Gujarat, Vaghela discovered that there was no room for a third force in the state and that meant that the only realistic choice for him was to merge his outfit with the Congress.

**T** rue, the old splinter groups have not come back to the Congress. Take, Mamata Banerjee. Her exit from the Congress in late 1997 was blessed by the '10 Janpath' establishment and her departure was cited as prime evidence of a party on the verge of fragmentation under Sitaram Kesri's uninspiring and uncharismatic leadership. Even after five years of Sonia Gandhi's consolidation, Mamata Banerjee refuses to bargain her freedom for the joys of serving a leader from the Nehru-Gandhi stable. Even the old '10 Janpath' faithful, G.K. Moopanar, refused to merge his party, the Tamil Mannila Congress with the parent body; it was only after his death that the depleted TMC cadres decided to experience the joys of 'home coming'. Nor for that matter have the 'ex-Congressmen' of Chandra Shekhar vintage rediscovered the Congress.

On the other hand, the party witnessed a major exodus almost within a year of the Sonia Gandhi coup; three senior leaders – Sharad Pawar, P.A. Sangama, and Tariq Anwar – were forced to leave the party for having the audacity to question Sonia Gandhi's eligibility (on account of her foreign origin) for the office of prime minister of India. The Sharad Pawar-led Nationalist Congress Party has

since forced the Congress into coalition arrangement in Maharashtra, and has otherwise shown a capacity to hurt the Congress.

**N**onetheless, the Congress 'high command' – leaders and the cadres – are entitled to a sense of satisfaction, even smugness; the dominant belief at the core of the Sonia Gandhi establishment is that all that the party has to do is to sit tight and wait for the next round of the Lok Sabha elections when anti-incumbency and tiredness with a non-performing NDA should make the voters give the Congress the requisite majority. The AICC brass sees to it that the 'leaders' and cadres are kept sufficiently engaged internally with this or that 'conclave', 'retreat', 'convention'. The fact that there are 15 Congress chief ministers is often worked up to create a prime ministerial ambience around Sonia Gandhi.

Yet there is an all-round sense of unease, a sense of something amiss, something unreal, something artificial in an otherwise picture-perfect political setting. Hence, the nagging question: Why is the Congress not reinventing itself? Why is the Congress still saddled with the oldies – Arjun Singh, Narain Dutt Tiwari, Karunakaran, Vasant Sathe, Moti Lal Vora, R.K. Dhawan, Mohsina Kidwai? It is a logical and obvious question; any modern political organization should have long been able to weed out the non-functional 'bosses' from their hierarchical positions. But outsiders miss the point; these oldies, who for their own selfish reasons prefer to call themselves 'family loyalists', constitute the praetorian guard, forever willing to fight the family's battle the moment someone invokes the democratic principle to question's leader's (non)performance. These oldies are useful retainers in a decaying feudal order.

To be fair, the Congress is not the only party that has shown little inclination and experience of reinventing itself. The tradition among political parties in India is that of a dissident/dissatisfied leader walking away, forming a new outfit, rather than staying put and trying to change or capture the party from within. The 'constitution' of almost every party provides overwhelming advantage to the incumbent leader/group. The Socialists got around the problem by splitting perennially; later the Janata Party/Janata Dal continued the tradition – a Chandra Shekhar walks out, forms his mini party; Mulayam Singh Yadav, Laloo Prasad Yadav, Ram Vilas Paswan, H.D. Deve Gowda, Ajit Singh, all prefer to be big frogs in their own very small ponds.

**A**s far as the Congress is concerned, there have only been two recent occasions for the party to do a bit remulching of leadership slots. The first time was the great split of 1969, when an exodus at the top created vacancies and opportunities for the eager and the ambitious middle cadres. The second occasion came during the Janata Party era, when faced with massive prosecution and persecution, Sanjay Gandhi took charge of the party and reformed it into a fighting force, bringing in new faces and younger, rougher voices.

On both occasions the party reached out to new social groups, gave itself a different ideological profile, and re-marketed its leadership as dynamic, energetic and purposeful. On both occasions the electorate favoured the party with massive mandates. Once again, there is a lurking yearning among the cadres, friends of the party as well as the secular voices, that somehow the Congress will reinvent itself as a pan-Indian political organization, capable of rescuing

the polity from the clutches of the BJP/sangh parivar. This yearning is very much at odds with the otherwise picture-perfectness that defines the prevailing mood at the AICC.

And this yearning for 'reinventing' has primarily to do with Sonia Gandhi's all too palpable 'foreignness'. In this age of mass communication, round-the-clock electronic news channels, the expectation of highly verbalized leadership, Sonia Gandhi is a major public relations embarrassment every time she makes a public appearance. And in this age of heightened and reinvented nationalism, Sonia Gandhi's foreignness becomes a sore point.

The cultivated standoff with Pakistan, and the post '9/11' animosity towards Islam have made a vast majority of the Indian electorate vulnerable to patriotic/nationalistic/xenophobic appeals and symbols. The middle classes remain unenthusiastic about a leader who remains the 'outsider'; and, given the communication explosion, this middle class unease about Sonia Gandhi has travelled to the periphery and has seeped into the rural calculus as well.

**M**ost Congress leaders pretend that the 'foreigner issue' has dissipated because the party has continued to do well at the state level, while the party's political opponents are only too happy to allow the issue to linger on, to be tapped and exploited only at the time of national vote. But both the Congress leaders and the Congress' political opponents remain deeply conscious of the divisive potential of the issue. Yet the mythology of 'natural order' within the Congress renders it blasphemous to question this family-centric arrangement in the party.

More than the 'foreigner issue', there is an all-round acute awareness

that Sonia Gandhi has failed to restore the 'high command' to its old glory, when the high command acted wisely, and fairly, inspiring both respect and awe. All the presumed gifts of the Nehru-Gandhi family seem to have eluded Sonia Gandhi. She has so far proved to be a poor vote-catcher, no patch on her mother-in-law, or even on her husband; large chunks of the country – Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Tamil Nadu, West Bengal – remain impervious to the family's charm. Nor has she surprised the cadres or the country with any flash of 'vision' or even freshness of approach; outside the party's cheering-crowd, she has yet to emerge as a symbol of inspiration and hope.

Sonia Gandhi as the High Command does not command the requisite awe: ask K. Karunakaran. (And it is this same Karunakaran who was the first to cast a stone at Sitaram Kesri, demanding that he make way for Sonia Gandhi; today, five years later the old man wants to 'negotiate' terms of reconciliation with Sonia Gandhi). Despite all the visible consolidation, she is unable to infuse new blood. The centrepiece of the latest round of 'reshuffle' at the AICC is the return of the 76-year old Nawal Kishore Sharma as the general secretary in charge of the crucial state of Uttar Pradesh. What is more, an entire generation of the Indian voters has no recollection of the 'sacrifices' made by the Nehru-Gandhi family; the last time a Nehru-Gandhi took oath as prime minister of India was in 1984 but by the time Rajiv Gandhi was voted out, his pedigree no longer impressed anyone.

**T**he Congress thus finds itself having to grapple with an existential dilemma. The Nehru-Gandhi family's contributions in the past are no longer an asset in an India that has changed

so dramatically since 1991; the present nominee of the Nehru-Gandhi family is yet to set the Jamuna on fire because her very political persona hinges not on her leadership attributes but on who her husband and her mother-in-law were. There is a stalemate between the family-centric Congress and the new, changing India; one insists on the validity and relevance of the past, the other does not care for the pretenders and pretences in the name of the past.

**T**he problem, then, can be redefined: the family (and its parasitically dependent *durbar*) will not let go of its control over the party, and will therefore continue to promote a structured bogusness in the Congress and its ways of thinking and behaviour. The shaman has been found out to be without the gift of witchcraft and yet will not permit the modern medicine man to set up shop. Can then the feudal demands of a family-centric control mechanism be married with the imperatives of a modern political organization in a fast changing and always churning polity? Can the Congress reposition itself in the electoral market as an alternative to the straggling 'accommodate one accommodate all' National Democratic Alliance? Given its present family-centric leadership, can the Congress still hope to mesmerize the vast electorate to give the party a chance to restore vitality and resilience to the Indian state order?

The answer is an unambiguous no, both in the short and long term. In the short term, there is little likelihood of Sonia Gandhi overcoming her 'Indianness' deficiency; unless the national mood changes dramatically before the next Lok Sabha elections, the voters are likely to remain uneasy about wanting to see her as prime minister of India. The Congress' political rivals can be relied upon to exploit this dormant unease. The problem,

however, goes beyond the next Lok Sabha elections. The family-centric control mechanism has gradually brought about three profound changes, each one of them fundamentally debilitating.

First, the Nehru-Gandhi 'natural order' has over the years de-recognised the legitimacy of popular support. No one – no chief minister, no central minister, no parliamentarian, no MLA, no MLC, no sarpanch, no mayor, and no zilla parishad leader – can be deemed to have won a democratic election without the help of the divine charisma of the Leader. Everyone is reduced to a creature of the 'high command'; be it the veteran Narain Dutt Tiwari or the greenhorn Ajit Jogi, everyone is forced to proclaim himself to be 'Sonijee's' humble servant.

**T**here was a time when the Congress leaders could have a popular base of their own and make do without the leader's charisma. Electoral success was deemed to independently bestow a halo on the winner. Remember how S.K. Patil was humbled in the 1967 Lok Sabha elections by a young socialist, George Fernandes, but within two years he won a byelection in the summer of 1969 from the Sabarkantha Lok Sabha constituency. The moment the elections results were announced, he could proclaim that he was going to Delhi to rearrange equations. That kind of democratic assertion is no longer permissible.

Consider, for instance: after the Himachal Pradesh vote, it was obvious to one and all that Virbhadrha Singh was the only logical claimant to the chief minister's post, but the Sonia Gandhi coterie pretended that it could deny Singh the post and if eventually he got the job he had to be demonstratively thankful to Sonijee rather than to the voters in Himachal Pradesh. There is no place in the Congress for

someone like a Narendra Modi who can claim to have won on a 'Modi vote'. This psychology – internally enforced as the working religion – blunts the organizations' collective egalitarian instincts, thereby rendering it at odds with the masses; leaders and cadres alike spend much energy and resources in preserving and protecting their patch within the party rather than reaching out to the citizens.

**S**econd, this wilful delegitimization of the principle of popular support for anyone other than the Leader makes the Congress an extremely unattractive proposition for the ambitious, the hungry and the angry activist/leader, grounded in any kind of social base structure. This insistence that every leader of any stature survives and prospers only because of the Leader's indulgence turns the potential Ram Vilas Paswans and the Mayawatis away from the party. It is no wonder that the Congress today cannot claim to have a dalit leader of any standing (though it may have a Harijan chief minister in Maharashtra); or, for that matter, any OBC leader or a Rajput leader.

The Congress is no longer the 'platform organization' that was open and hospitable to one and all and knew how to accommodate the ambitious and the aspiring. Its new internal value system has eroded the party's capacity to attract new forces and individuals. This has reduced the party to a status quoist organization and, hence, a moribund political outfit. Worse, the party's internal obsession with the feudal control rites render it at odds with its core electoral support structure: the poor, the adivasis, the kisans, the harijans, the original Indira Gandhi constituency.

Third, and this follows as a consequence of the first two propositions:

the Congress has become a closed shop, no longer a mass political organization but a private arrangement between the First Family and, say, a thousand other families. Lok Sabha and assembly constituencies are deemed to be family pocket boroughs; the operating principle has become that 'If I retire (or die) the party must nominate my son/wife/daughter from my constituency.' In the Gujarat assembly elections, sons of almost all leading Congress leaders – Madhavsingh Solanki, B.K. Gadhavi, Amarsingh Chaudhry, Prabodh Raval, Shanker-singh Vaghela – got party tickets. The story is repeated in state after state.

**T**he Congress is beginning to look like a loose federation between an ineffectual Mughal emperor and numerous sultanates paying nominal obeisance to the Delhi throne. The only other group that is able to break into the party is of very rich individuals and industrialists, who are able to 'buy' their entree and nominations to the Rajya Sabha or the Lok Sabha. If this trend does not get reversed in the years to come, the Congress would cease to be a political party, reducing itself to a grand zamindari.

Conclusion, foregone.

A political party changes itself on only two counts: a massive electoral defeat triggers an internal power struggle or a national catastrophe forces a party to re-evaluate its ideology and re-examine its leadership. For the Congress the choice is whether the party can find the collective wisdom to understand that feudal values and ideas cannot be the governing principles for a modern political organization in the 21st century. If the Congress chooses not to acknowledge the democratic temper of the 21st century, it would find itself ignored and bypassed in the new India.



# A matter of faith

EDWARD LUCE

Mahatma Gandhi famously advised the Congress to disband itself after independence since by then it would have achieved its principal objective. Its continued presence would suffocate the healthy development of politics in post-colonial India, he said.

Like many great men, Gandhi was often wrong. But his (quixotic) advice gathers salience with each passing decade. Today, in 2003, Congress is no longer the same party that rallied Indians of all shapes and sizes under the banner of freedom. Nor is it the same party that held a potentially fissiparous country together in the 1950s and 1960s and which gave India its federal and democratic character. Congress is no longer even the party that belatedly set India on the road to economic reform in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

Most of these attributes are part of history – India's history – and the rest have either been appropriated, bettered or sidelined by other parties. Congress, in other words, badly needs to reinvent itself, even to the extent of relaunching itself under a new identity. But more of that later.

What, then, does Congress have in its favour? There are three qualities that remain unique to Asia's oldest political party. First, despite its weakness in some of the larger states, Congress remains India's only truly national party. Over the last decade the BJP has been able to capture a roughly

equal share of the national vote but for the time being its support remains concentrated in the north and the west. Second, Congress is the only party for which secularism is a core principal. There are plenty of other parties that remain faithful to India's secular Constitution but this is hardly central to their identity. Most are either regional, casteist or, like the CPI (M), gradually folding themselves into the sectarian dustbin of history.

Third, and perhaps most importantly, Congress remains a dynasty. Of course, there are plenty of other dynasties – with the BJP, interestingly, the least un-meritocratic of the lot. But a quick glance at the Telugu Desam Party, the DMK, the various Janatas and the Samajwadis suggests that nepotism is not a unique practice. But only Congress can boast the Nehru-Gandhi family. And it is only Congress that appears explicitly to predicate its future on dynasty.

Yet on all three counts Sonia Gandhi's Congress is experiencing difficulties, possibly terminal. Its claims to being a national party are gradually being eroded both from below – the challenge from lower caste and linguistic parties – and from above – the continued, and profoundly troubling, rise of upper-caste Hindutva. In his recent book, *India's Silent Revolution*, Christophe Jaffrelot chronicles with merciless detail the impact on Congress of the rise of lower caste



politicians over the last 25 years. Congress, in spite of its social philosophy, remained almost wholly controlled by Brahmin or Kshatriya politicians in the big north Indian states for most of its post-colonial existence. And now it is paying the price.

With no hope of winning more than a quarter of the seats in states like Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, West Bengal or Tamil Nadu, Congress will find it impossible to come to power in New Delhi on its own. Instead it would have to rely on the likes of Laloo Prasad Yadav and Mulayam Singh to bring it to national office – politicians who have made an art form out of extracting high prices for very little.

**F**urthermore, the fragmentation of Congress's traditional social coalition is not necessarily at an end. In states such as Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra, tribal and lower caste voters still tend to identify with the hand of Congress. But there is no guarantee that the elephant and the bicycle will not add to the graffiti over the next few years. Such trends – or social 'churning', as Indian political scientists call it – might well have been unstoppable, even if, when it had the chance, Congress had proved more diligent at serving the interests of its lower caste supporters. In contrast, the alienation of the Muslim vote in large parts of India, most notably in Uttar Pradesh, was wholly avoidable.

Similarly, a large part of the party's upper caste support base has also drifted away, especially in the urban areas where the BJP is strong. This process appears to be complete. The real battle now is for the loyalty of the other backward castes and India's emerging lower middle class. Here again, though, Congress's catch-all fuzziness could prove a poor match both for the better targeted social politics of OBC parties and the organisa-

tional brilliance of the Sangh Parivar. In short, Congress remains a national party. But its strengths are in pockets – and there is no guarantee that what happened to it in UP will not recur in other Congress strongholds over the next 20 years.

Then there is the party's attachment to secularism. Much fuss has been made about the fact that Congress played a 'B-team' strategy in the Gujarat elections last December, appointing a former RSS *pracharak* as its leader and purging all but five Muslims from its electoral ticket. Sonia's temple visitations seemed to confirm such suspicions. Much has also been made of Digvijay Singh's apparent pursuit of 'soft Hindutva', whether it was his criticisms of Atal Bihari Vajpayee's beef eating record or his own patronage of Vedic studies at various state institutions of learning.

**E**qually, significance has been attached to the Congress party's sweeping victory in Himachal Pradesh and the fact that neither Pravin Togadia nor Narendra Modi were able to ignite passions in a predominantly upper caste state. Many have also made play of Ashok Gehlot's actions in Rajasthan where for a brief – but nevertheless enjoyable – week Pravin Togadia was put behind bars. Gehlot has also attempted to put a halt to the VHP's *trishul* distribution campaign in contrast to the more equivocal stance of chief ministers elsewhere.

There is thus plenty of material to furnish two very contrasting views of where Congress is headed: that Congress has lost its nerve and is becoming the party of soft Hindutva, or that Congress is finally standing up to the forces of Indian fascism. Neither reading is wholly right nor wholly wrong. And that is a problem.

In fact, the problem is nothing new. Throughout its history Congress

has suffered from internal divisions on whether it should oppose or co-opt Hindu communalism. Few doubt that had Sardar Patel lived longer, Jawaharlal Nehru would not have had such a free hand to imprint his vision of secularism on India. After all, it was partly the Sardar's idea to build the temple in Somnath – a project that had broadly similar aims to the one in Ayodhya, even if it was conducted in a more civilized fashion. But even without the Patel wing, it was a Congress prime minister, Rajiv Gandhi, who gave the VHP the keys to the Babri Masjid complex in 1987. And it was a Congress prime minister, Narasimha Rao, who stood by and watched its destruction in December 1992.

Congress, like many great parties, is no stranger to short-term expediency. But such expediency has longer-term consequences – such as the erosion of its Muslim support base in UP. And it often fails even to achieve its short-term purpose, as Shankersinh Vaghela would doubtless testify. Wherever there is an argument about religion, the BJP will win it nine times out of ten. Yet, as the contrasting electoral strategies in Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan demonstrate, Congress is yet to conclude its debate on how to deal with the politics of religion.

**M**ost probably, Congress will continue to shift restlessly from one strategy to another depending on its reading of the local mood. But such variations at the local level undermine the party's ability to project a coherent and credible message at the national level – particularly damaging when general elections come around. Such opportunism also represents a strategic failure to understand the Sangh Parivar for what it is: a very determined group of organisations that are

working towards a common goal, even if recalcitrant members sometimes diverge on short-term tactics.

As a foreigner based in India, it is often hard to grasp the real meaning that underlies surface events. But there is little that cannot be better understood by talking and travelling as widely as possible. Yet no amount of travelling or talking can help me understand why – after all the gains the Sangh Parivar has made in the last 15 years – so many senior members of Congress appear so complacent about the challenge of Hindutva. Let me quote one or two remarks: ‘India is a very diverse and tolerant country. This thing will burn itself out,’ said one member of the AICC. ‘There is too much panic about the Sangh Parivar. There are so many other important things to focus on,’ said another. ‘We’ve seen this kind of thing before at Partition and in the late 1960s. It comes and goes.’

Such views are widespread among senior Congress apparatchiks. Of course, there are many who are deeply alarmed by Hindutva and who recognise it as a challenge to everything they hold dear. But they seem to be outnumbered or at least evenly matched by those who believe that the past is always the best guide to the future. In fact, the past is usually a terrible guide to the future. But that is another debate.

**T**he third waning Congress selling point is its royal family. What exactly does Sonia Gandhi believe? For many awestruck voters in the villages, it does not really matter what Sonia believes as long as they can get a glimpse of her at a campaign rally. There is no doubt that Sonia Gandhi’s name has a drawing power that few other politicians can match. But does crowd appeal translate into votes? Does Amitabh Bachchan really influence

political loyalties in UP? There seems to be room for doubt. Didn’t the BSP recently win an MLA seat in the heart of Gandhi’s Amethi constituency?

Yet the question is not as important as whether Sonia has the qualities to lead Congress to victory and beyond. Again, there are grounds for polite scepticism. First, she is relatively uneducated on the complexities of politics, economics and all the other subjects that gives an effective leader the confidence to formulate – and elucidate – clear policies. Supporters say that Sonia is highly diligent, works late into the night and reads frenetically. They also say that she consults widely, yet is decisive once she has chosen her course of action. Moreover, her decisions often reflect a native common sense. ‘Sonia has no kitchen cabinet,’ says one senior Congress MP. ‘She is also aware of the dangers of flattery.’

**A**ll of which reflects well on her undoubted integrity. But her supporters protest too much. More than five years after becoming leader of Congress, Sonia is still afraid to talk to the media except on rare occasions and then only on intricately pre-arranged terms. Sonia also remains reluctant to accept speaking engagements where she is not sure of the composition of the audience. Such timidity is understandable given the ruthlessness of Indian politics. But Sonia Gandhi is presenting herself as the next prime minister of India, a deeply complex society of a billion people with nuclear weapons and a hostile neighbour that has them too. And yet she still won’t subject herself to unscripted interrogation. Is this really the person to take on Hindutva and defeat it?

The question of Ms Gandhi’s nationality is of course wholly insurmountable. Again, supporters insist that to the average voter it does not

matter. Leaving aside whether that is true, her national origins clearly matter to the BJP, to which it comes as a pleasant bonus. For that reason it also matters to Ms Gandhi, whose shyness must partly be a consequence of her fear of appearing un-Indian or making a basic mistake in Hindi that her opponents would mercilessly exploit.

**B**ut these are secondary considerations against whether Ms Gandhi’s Italian and Christian background handicap her ability to present a credible case against the forces of Hindu communalism. Nationalist movements – especially of the communal variety – are fuelled by deep-seated insecurities about social identity and are particularly immune to reasoned argument.

Ms Gandhi has argued many reasonable things, sometimes very eloquently, especially in the aftermath of pogroms in Gujarat. But her words did not appear to have any effect on the voters of Gujarat. Nor, given who she is and what the argument is about, are her words likely to do so in the future, however felicitously they may be phrased.

Sonia also faces a number of other challenges – such as how best to project the argument for economic reform without alienating those who feel left behind or threatened; or how to galvanise the grassroots of a party that, unlike its chief rival, is not cadre-based; and whether or not to deploy Rahul or Priyanka in the forthcoming elections. All of these are important issues. Sonia has had more than her fair share of misfortune in the loss of so many leading Congress figures, including Madhavrao Scindia and Rajesh Pilot. Their advice on these and other questions would have been invaluable. But they pale against the overriding objective of defeating Hindutva.

As a foreigner, I am ill-qualified to advise any Indian political party on its strategy. But for what its worth, this is my advice. Sonia Gandhi should announce that she will not become prime minister if Congress wins the next election. She should state clearly that she believes the goal of preserving and strengthening India's secular constitution is more important than her personal duty of preserving the Nehru-Gandhi political line.

Such an announcement would not preclude her from retaining a symbolic presence on the hustings and at big Congress events. But she must make it clear that in the interests of her party and her adopted country that the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty no longer calls the shots. It would obviously still play a role but more in the form of a constitutional monarchy. Congress should then relaunch itself under a Hindu leader who would adopt a clear strategy to combat the Sangh Parivar. This would involve broadcasting clearly and credibly at every opportunity and without deviation that Hindutva represents a gross distortion of Hindu values. And that it also represents a very damaging and corrosive distraction from the real problems that India faces.

**S**uch a leader should also pursue vigorous internal reform of Congress to re-shape it as a modern party that is consistent about upholding its core philosophy. This would mean putting an end to the cynical and opportunistic practice of wooing the conservative wing of Sunni Islam and adopting the sort of candidates who would meet with the approval of the mullahs.

It would be ruthless in rejecting the incitement of religious loyalty—to whichever constituency—as a basis of winning votes. It would declare religious affiliation irrelevant to the task of providing sanitation, jobs, eliminat-

ing corruption, building infrastructure and spreading economic growth to the masses.

As a matter of principle it would also support a uniform civil code for India, that is neither Hindu nor Muslim (although, given its incendiary potential, it would have to be explained carefully and totally disattached from the BJP's motivation).

**T**his message would be repeated up and down India at every opportunity and in a consistent and disciplined manner. It would need to be taken to the villages where most of India still lives. The link between renewing secularism and the urgency of providing economic security to ordinary Indians would need to be stressed repeatedly. These twin goals would come to be seen as two sides of the same coin—as indeed they are.

Of course, all this is hopelessly idealistic and naïve. And it would be optimistic to expect Sonia Gandhi to do the statesmanlike thing when all those who surround her would be counselling the opposite. But it is not half as naïve as the belief that Hindutva will somehow burn itself out in the natural course of events. That view is dangerously flawed.

Congress is too weak to defeat Hindutva but still strong enough to block the emergence of a force that could. Only an organisation that is as single-minded and dedicated in pursuit of its goals as the Sangh Parivar can hope to counter the seemingly inexorable spread of Hindutva.

Sonia is in the position to provide an incalculable service to her adopted country. Her decision to forego any prime ministerial ambitions would signal clearly that Congress is hungry for power and for the right reasons. It would amount to precisely the type of gesture that could begin to reverse the tide.

# Bridging the divide

SAHABZADA YUSUF AHMAD ANSARI

POLITICAL realities are multi faceted and do not easily lend themselves to correspondence or complimentary analysis with theories, especially theories which seek to define concepts like political reinvention and revival. As Sorel has observed; 'Politics are not a drama where scenes follow one another after a methodical plan... Politics are a conflict of which chance seems to be modifying the whole course.'

It is necessary to acknowledge the difficulty in attributing set causes or drawing up immaculate balance sheets when studying political processes and the fortunes of a political party. The best that a student of this subject can offer is to attribute relevance correctly to the various issues in circulation and present an insight into how those issues can be modified to contribute to the fortunes of a political party in a positive and meaningful way.

The Indian National Congress has known sharp and often sudden vicissitudes in a relatively short period of time. Its history and role as a party of government and now as a force of opposition holds prolonged but varied aspects of political success and failure. Each of these taken in conjunction with the political realities of India provides answers to what contributed to the decline of the Congress after five decades of near supremacy. Subsequently, it is within a study of these same aspects of power and politics that we can find avenues for a regeneration which must occur before the Congress is ready to return to the Treasury benches.

The question of how a revival of the Indian National Congress is to be affected has invited voluminous responses, indeed so much so that it has become an ancillary subject to the larger dimension of the studies of Indian politics. Wide ranging intellec-

tual offerings have meditated upon the loss of traditional vote-banks, thus implying social change or a change in the voting preferences of society. Other studies have held the insistence of the Congress leadership to reject coalition politics as a major cause for its isolation from government. Some have identified the systems problems within the organisational structure of the party as the greatest impediment to its rejuvenation. Still others have sought to permeate the smokescreen of ideological directives and faulted the policies and principles of the party when these do not stand up to electoral scrutiny.

**T**hese are only some of the multiple factors that have contributed to the decline of the Congress party. Considered in isolation none of them are vital, but as a generic accumulation they have contributed heavily to prolong the unhappy condition of the Congress and its members. A brief and contemporary look at the history of the Indian National Congress is necessary to understand exactly when and how matters began to slip for India's oldest political party.

Last month Sonia Gandhi completed five years as President of the Congress, a full term in office if you like. In these last five years the situation of the Congress has grown better than its opponents would like but remains worse than what its friends and supporters would hope for. The present Congress president took over a party which had suffered several dislocations in its last spell in power. None was as serious as the loss of its political provenance which some writers have characterized as nothing less than the collapse of the Nehruvian consensus as Prime Minister Narasimha Rao presided over the transition of the Congress party from its Nehruvian moorings into the pre-

viously uncharted but (for Congressmen) still uncomfortable waters of consensus government.

To begin with this approach drew support from individuals who later became standard bearers of the internal revolt to his leadership. Arjun Singh described Rao's efforts as '...the beginning of a new political experimentation in the running of the country.' Consequently the party accommodated the right wing and resigned itself to hopeless alliances in regions which until then had symbolised its electoral citadels. The impact of those practices have not yet subsided and can be felt overwhelmingly in crucial provinces like Uttar Pradesh which alone holds 15 per cent of India's parliamentary seats.

Alternatively the Rao government did set a radical and necessary economic agenda through its new economic policy, yet by their own admissions Congress ministers concluded: 'The "failure" of our liberalization strategy lies essentially in our inability to "sell" the idea of economic reform. We left it to the few chosen civil servants operating in the cloisters of industrial and business associations. Political salesmanship, vividly associated with our earlier socialist programmes of nationalization etc. was conspicuously absent. We failed in PR, not in the substance of our reform package.'

**T**his then has been one of the most severe problems for the Congress party and its leadership, that of presentation or more precisely, positioning. On secularism, economic policy, approach to coalitions, and on aspects of its organisation and structure, the Congress has suffered from a crisis of presentation. This crisis of presentation is all the more crucial in a polity dominated by a particular kind of bourgeois assumption about politics.

The opinion makers, pressure groups and levers of influence who currently dominate political thinking in India cater to their own class, a class incidentally which found its voice through economic empowerment under Congress regimes.

The paradox of the politics in the last decade has been the creation of this substantial middle class which owes no electoral allegiance to the source of its generation. Indeed why should it? Typically the Congress party finds itself half stuck in history and half in combat with the daily practicalities of modern day politics. While its apparatchiks shuffle between the passages of the AICC exchanging notes and intrigue with one another, the pyramidal and deferential party power structure grows ever distant from the aggregation of causes which require its support and representation.

**I**t is difficult to assess the goal towards which the Congress wishes to mobilise its audiences and at another level, its support. The traditional pro-poor or alternatively 'left of centre' approach which served the party well until the 1980s finds the spectre of casteism blocking its way. The poor of India are no longer categorised as such, instead poverty has the label of caste identity stamped upon it which requires peeling away.

For the Congress it has become near impossible to promote the interests of a particular class without paying the price of social reform, and social reform in India is politically a double edged sword. It is the political identity of the Congress which is the issue for these constituencies, fractured as they are along lines of casteist, communal and economic loyalties.

In his book *The Idea of India*, Sunil Khilnani narrates this problem in the following way: 'The crisis of

Congress became a crisis of the state itself and hence a crisis in the terms of Indian identity. Congress had functioned as a centrist party, spokesman for no single category or interest, and its coalitional character enabled individuals and groups throughout India to make a nest in it. Its pragmatic political determination in the two decades after independence had managed to confine the scope of the alternative definitions of Indianness which Hindu nationalists proposed. The later intensification of democratic competition forced it to appeal to more exclusive identities: this broke the old pattern of political representation and created opportunities for rival parties both in the regions and at the Centre.'

**I**n 1979 Mary Carras, the American writer set out a number of views and hypothesis regarding the role of leadership in the Congress party. Her analysis is relevant to any contemporary study of the Congress leadership and leadership style within the party. Carras argued that a 'systems problem within' was responsible for the 'cross-cutting conflicts of roles and functions' which pervaded the party at every level. According to her study the leader of the party could rely either on instruments of persuasion or on instruments of coercion and compulsion which would be centrally guided and administered.

While the first option would be enacted through the apparatus of government, the second would rely on party machinery. In the present context when the party is out of power and without the contraptions of the state to enact its decisions, the onus for action rests on the president of the party. How these levers of leadership are exercised today is the prerogative of Sonia Gandhi and since a large part of Congress culture has always been a reflection of its leader let us consider how

the present leader has managed to fulfil her role.

Traditionally the ethos of the party tends to be formulated by the personality of its leaders and there is a strong and evident emphasis on the organisational culture of the party to revere the leader and thus make his or her personality a symbol of the rest of the party. This inevitably means greater centralisation of power within the structure of the party and upon decision-making.

Decision-making continues to be top-down and cohesive. The custom of central intervention in the functioning of state units still exists but no longer as a habitual exercise of authority; its use is more sparing. Under Sonia Gandhi decision-making is more participatory and her transactional style of leadership involves the construction of a consensus before a policy is implemented. Naturally this style has led to greater inter-level trust within the party; delegation and discussion is more frequent, directives are more meaningful rather than merely memorable and the injection of input politics is more varied. At one level this translates into positive discrimination between issues of real concern and what can be described as rhetorical *raison d'être*'s. What then has been the outcome of this leadership style?

**F**ive years ago the Indian National Congress ruled over three states of the Indian Republic. Today that number has swelled to sixteen. The *mantra* of 'good governance' has offered serious rivalry to the 'cultural nationalism' of the BJP. The former is a necessity, the latter merely a matter of fact. Thus the Congress has successfully pitted thought against thought in the battle to win the minds of the Indian electorate.

Sometimes the approach has been convoluted and consequently the

party has suffered, the Gujarat election being the most apparent example. For a brief moment in the aftermath of the Gujarat results the Congress appeared to flounder and the popular media, always eager for sensational hyperbolism, made it appear that the Sangh was on course for a rendezvous with their promised age of anarchy. Had the Congress won the Gujarat election it would have been commended for its boldness; as things turned out it was crucified for its brashness.

**T**he lessons of Gujarat, however, have come in time for future campaigns, for to be right wing requires convictions which, fortunately for the polity, the Congress does not possess. A 'clear blue water' between the NDA and the Congress is therefore a necessity and the Congress cannot benefit by offering the same basket of policies as the rest of the NDA, even under a different packaging.

Bruno Mégret, a leader of France's National Front did some plain but prudent speaking when he commented: 'If the political world is divided into three then one must go; the one in the middle.' Therefore, subverting its own fundamental principles like secularism to one night ideological stands like Hindutva will not aid the cause of the party. Congress leaders must fight political battles on their own terrain rather than seek to claim the policies and principles of their opponents. The latter cannot become a tactic in the party's broader strategy to reclaim lost territory.

There is a diversity of political thought in the Congress party but there is also a basic unity which underlines this diversity. That unity has always been the Nehruvian principle of politics which needs to be pursued more aggressively than ever before. It is a basic conviction for secularism and

social justice exists, as it does, in the minds of Congressmen, then a commitment to upholding those values and a confidence in propagating them on every available forum must also be carried out.

**T**he Congress has to present itself as an alternative government and thus must address the grievances emanating from the public against issues of governance. Simultaneously it must stop paying attention to the diversionary ruckus being engineered by the Sangh. Committing itself to quasi-philosophical positions on essentially political ground cannot lead to the evolution of a political position, and subsequently may destroy the chances of reaching the position of government. The next general election will be a crucial one and for Sonia Gandhi perhaps her most spectacular chance to recover primacy for her party.

The dual dilemma of economic policy and coalition government, which has so far remained unresolved, requires deliberation and resolution in a very short span of time. While the economic question occupies an entire realm of its own and is covered elsewhere in this issue let us consider the political one, that is the Congress stand on coalition government. Arguably this requires an assessment of coalition politics in India within the non-Congress parties.

Ideally the confluence of interests for coalitions must be dictated by coherent and principled political beliefs and not opportunism alone. However, the purpose of coalition governments in India, so far, has merely represented a translation of anti-Congressism into a tactic for power sharing. But why is the Congress wary of forging a national umbrella of coalition partners? There are two primary factors for this; strategically coalitions cannot benefit the Congress, at the

same time ideological and policy issues do not allow the Congress to compromise willy nilly.

To elaborate further, it is difficult to argue that the party will benefit by withdrawing from regional spaces and giving over territory to smaller, federalist political groups. Recent events have shown that the likelihood of breakaway groups returning to the Congress fold is far greater than further disintegration in the regional levels of the party. While the merger of the TMC with Congress in Tamil Nadu last year is perhaps not yet a trend it is nonetheless a very encouraging development for the party. Similar progressions in two other big states, West Bengal and Maharashtra are presently improbable but not impossible by any account.

**T**he BJP adds to its presence each time it strikes an alliance with a regional party, conversely geo-political space contracts for the Congress every time it succumbs to the pressure of forming an alliance. Noticeably, the Congress is in competition with too many of those who are probable allies in their home states. The possibility of an alliance with the Samajwadi Party in Uttar Pradesh for example is likely to be the first casualty due to these factors since both parties share common voters in the minority community in that state.

The other issue which mitigates the benefits of an alliance is that of ideological dilution. Proponents of this view argues that the implementation of the Congress party's core goals will only suffer as interests and ideological points of view accumulate within the demands of coalition politics. On this count at least the Congress is better placed than the BJP which has almost forgotten its right wing agenda amidst the compulsions of coalition politics. The advantage which the

Congress enjoys is the lack of any controversial agenda for governance which may lead it into confrontation with its allies.

Coalition government in India is therefore about strategies for displacement. The determinants that unite the NDA are unlikely to be factors of consolidation for a Congress led alliance. Anti-Congressism, the dominant cause of unity for the NDA is as old as the Congress party; however, never before has it achieved the kind of success that we are witnessing today. The NDA government appears to be heading towards a full term with Prime Minister Vajpayee the first non-Congress prime minister to complete five years in office.

Primarily, it is the promise of appetising loaves of power after nearly five decades of hunger which has proved a powerful inducement for anti-Congress unity. Yet there is some consolation for the Congress in all this, and that is the exigencies of generational considerations. The leadership of the BJP is approaching eighty and it leads a party which has already reached its optimum strength in Parliament.

**T**he image of an octogenarian prime minister is somewhat discomfiting for the citizens of a country where over 75 per cent of the population is aged between 18 and 40. The perpetuation of traditional politicians and a traditionalist practice of politics is despised and viewed with wariness if not suspicion. There is practically no representation for youth, urban or rural in party politics. Their participation is limited to the role of a huge 'walk on crowd' whenever foot soldiers are required to fill up a rally ground or burn an effigy or two.

The leadership of the Congress party has come in for some strong criticism over the years about its will-



ingness (sometimes enthusiasm) to recycle old leaders with cramped styles and a pulverised thinking as suitable messiahs in today's political world. Such examples are meaningless to the majority of voters in this country, most of whom were not even around when these patriarchs were able to flex their political muscle and exercise real strength. The average age of the Congress Working Committee is on the wrong side of sixty. While a lot of the criticism is unjustified it is sometimes genuine, especially when there is no shortage of young talent available within the party with leaders on message but not on board, that is the tragedy.

It would be incongruous to pass any sweeping intellectual judgements about the state of the Congress party or assess the balance of probabilities for the next general election. The aim of this piece was to highlight certain themes of import and consequence and construct an argument over those themes. Since we began by addressing the situation of political realities as paramount, that would also be an appropriate theme with which to conclude. The realities are that the Congress is certainly better placed to contest the next general election, not only because of its own organisational enhancements but because unlike in 1999 the next general election is unlikely to be part of the series of forced elections by the Congress.

Lastly, a genuine capacity to govern well and bring to bear initiative in policy making and political action is something that the Congress has finally learnt to do. Agenda's for governance, papers for social welfare, the vocabulary of social justice are all themes being practised by Congress governments in their respective states. And the ability to deliver the goods coupled with the capacity to present oneself as a viable deliverer was all that ever mattered in politics.

# Learning to communicate

ARATI R. JERATH

IT was a bizarre tale but sadly, one that most journalists half-believed. The story surfaced during the Gujarat assembly elections with allegations that Congress leaders were distributing envelopes of money to correspondents to have their public meetings covered. There was a twist in the tale too. The envelopes were said to have contained one hundred rupees less than the sanctioned amount because middlemen had siphoned off a cut for themselves! It doesn't matter that the story was never proved. It gained currency (it was actually published in a leading daily) as a cruel affirmation of the images that have come to be associated with the grand old party of Indian politics. Corruption, arrogance and the misplaced belief that favourable publicity, like votes, can be bought.

Tragically for the Congress, it continues to be haunted by the credibility crisis that dogged it in its dealings with the media through its long stint in government. Despite being out of power for seven years now, it has somehow failed to establish the bonhomie that marks the relationship between an opposition party and journalists. At best, there's a mutual wariness; at worst, they are antagonists. Neither has sought to make common cause as anti-establishment voices raised against the government of the day.

Journalists can perhaps be accused of clinging to old biases. However, there seems to be a strange reluctance on the part of the Congress to try and change its perceptions. Although the spokesman's office was expanded into a full-fledged media department a few years ago for better



information flow, the party seems to have forgotten the vital art of political communication. If at all it has a message to convey, it doesn't know the idiom any more. In an age dominated by sound bytes, the Congress has lost its voice.

**I**t isn't as if the party has failed to take political initiatives or respond to challenges. But somehow it has been unable to capitalise on its strengths and showcase itself as a combative opposition. There are innumerable occasions on which the Congress missed the bus because it lacks the necessary image building skills. The most glaring is the beating it took on the Godhra incident. Congress President Sonia Gandhi was actually one of the first national leaders off the block to condemn the gory attack that killed 64 *kar sevaks* travelling on a train through Godhra in Gujarat. She issued a statement the same evening, before Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee and Deputy Prime Minister L.K. Advani.

The next day, it was Vajpayee and other government leaders who pleaded with Members of Parliament not to disrupt the Lok Sabha over the incident so that the Union budget could be presented. Yet, in public memory, Sonia and the Congress have gone down as the villains of the piece for not expressing proper outrage over the massacre. BJP leaders repeatedly criticized her and her party, obliquely blaming them for the subsequent mob violence against Muslims because of their lack of sympathy for the Hindu pilgrims. Despite the facts of the case, the Congress inexplicably failed to counter these charges. Either it did not know how to respond or it did not understand the ramifications of the BJP's propaganda. It behaved like an ostrich and buried its head in the sand.

Similarly, the party did nothing to publicize the shamelessly political

nature of the riots that followed the Godhra carnage. Local Gujarat Congress leaders did extensive studies on the pattern of the riots and had plenty of evidence to show that most of them occurred in their strongholds, lending credence to the theory that the flames of communal violence were deliberately fanned to divide the Congress vote bank. Instead, the party chose to keep quiet, not just officially but unofficially too. No effort was made to share data with the media or organise selective leaks to push the point. And this is when the media, at least the national media, was almost unanimously critical of the BJP-RSS role in the communal violence.

**I**t is surprising that the Congress has done little to correct its shortcomings on this score. It is pitted against a party like the BJP which not only has an overdeveloped talent for spin doctoring, but also a well-oiled propaganda machine to carry its message across the board. Even in government, Union ministers take time out to spin a line on behalf of the party to the media, which then faithfully reports a new BJP strategy, a fresh political offensive or the latest thinking on a controversial issue.

Not so the Congress. For instance, Sonia was the only national leader to campaign during the Jammu and Kashmir assembly elections despite the heightened security risk during that period. Neither Prime Minister Vajpayee nor Home Minister Advani addressed public meetings or even visited the state although the BJP had high stakes in Jammu.

Yet, the Congress did not try nor seemed to want to play up this bold gesture by the party chief. As it turned out, it did exceedingly well in the polls but there was no attempt to link the victory to Sonia's visits or indeed package it in a larger political perspec-

tive. It was as if the Congress was not bothered about building up its leader's image and was content to let the facts speak for themselves.

The recent block level presidents' convention, held in the capital, is another telling example of a lost opportunity. It was an innovative move and according to most participants, successfully executed as well. The convention was intended to be a launching pad for next year's parliamentary election campaign with the Congress leadership giving its rank and file a clear political direction. Indeed, for the first time after Gujarat, the Congress made a conscious effort to move away from the increasingly futile debate on Hindutva and focused instead on bread and butter issues on which the NDA government is vulnerable.

**U**nfortunately, the political import of the convention was lost in fuzzy messaging. Sonia's speeches were widely covered. What the reports missed were the real gains of the event – the mobilisation of grassroots workers on such a large scale, the enthusiasm, the sense of purpose it generated and most importantly, it defined a political agenda for the Congress in the months leading up to the next general election. The convention did not merely mark a return to Indira Gandhi's *garibi hatao* slogan, as most of the media reported.

It would be easy to blame this on poor journalism. The truth is the party simply did not bother to brief journalists on the nuances. Virtually no senior Congress leader or office bearer spent any time in the media enclosure to package the convention for public consumption or analyse its political importance. There was no effort to give the event the right spin or put a larger perspective on it. The party seemed quite content to dish out routine stuff to the media.

Contrast this with the BJP. At any gathering, Sushma Swaraj, Pramod Mahajan, Arun Jaitley and Venkaiah Naidu invariably stroll over to the media for a chat. Make no mistake, there is a hidden agenda in these deceptively casual gestures, which is to ensure that the message the party wants to convey gets through. They do it even today when they are in government and many of them are Union ministers. And it's because, apart from being more media friendly than their Congress counterparts, BJP leaders are also schooled to push the party agenda rather than individual predilections.

**I**n the Congress, on the other hand, individuals tend to put themselves before the party. A Congress leader wanting to back stab a rival will seek out journalists although, just the day before, the same person may have refused to answer questions related to developments in the party. For example, a spate of critical stories against Sonia's Girl Friday Ambika Soni found almost as much column space in newspapers as the party president's speeches at the block presidents' convention. It was easy to figure out why. The stories appeared on the eve of a reshuffle in the All India Congress Committee and were clearly aimed at cutting Ambika down. For once, 'debriefing' was in full swing!

It's not that the gulf between the Congress and the media cannot be bridged. Today, they are both on the same side of the fence with the NDA government as a common target. The Congress needs to understand this and stop treating the media as an adversary. The media can actually be an ally for an opposition party, which must necessarily be aggressive and utilise every weapon it can to put the government in the dock.

What can the Congress do to use the media more effectively? First of

all, it will have to stop behaving like a ruling party. If the BJP is having difficulty in adjusting to the compulsions of a party of governance, the Congress seems to be finding it equally hard to meet the demands of being in the opposition. It has an unshakable belief in its divine right to rule, which colours all its responses. Consequently, it continues to be stiff and aloof with the media and is transparently reluctant to part with information.

It is ironic that Congress leaders emerge even from all-party meetings and behave as if they have been discussing top secret matters of state. Other opposition leaders think nothing of giving a detailed briefing on the proceedings to the press. Not so their comrades-in-arms in the Congress. They remain as closemouthed as if they have just finished a Cabinet meeting.

**T**oday, the focus should be on the BJP-led NDA government, not the Congress. The party would do well to remember this and shed its arrogant attitude and its suspicions of the media. Interactive sessions with the press need not be seen as a breach of party discipline. In fact, senior leaders could be encouraged to talk to journalists informally and give them a perspective on issues and Congress strategy. This would facilitate more informed coverage by the media and certainly go a long way in erasing the biases that make journalists pounce on reports of infighting and dissidence rather than look for stories with political substance.

In this context, the Congress needs to take a second look at its media department. With the mushrooming of television channels, magazines and newspapers, it was a good idea to supplement the official spokesperson's efforts with a special cell devoted to taking care of the needs of the

press. Over the years since its inception, the department has facilitated information flow between the party and the media, standardised official briefings across the country so that state units do not contradict the central office and streamlined the availability of routine data such as photo ops at 10 Janpath, Congress Working Committee meetings, and so on.

**W**hat the department lacks is political content. Consequently, it is unable to give a fuller perspective to the day's official briefing. Although it has a panel of spokespersons in addition to the chief spokesperson, few of them seem to be in the decision-making loop and are therefore unable to add to what has been stated officially. Also, since they are not part of the inner circle and nor are they given detailed briefings, they cannot plan media strategies or management of news.

It is ironic that a department, which should be vital to an opposition party, has seen four different chairpersons since its inception in 1998. The panel of spokespersons has gone through rapid changes too with leaders being shuffled like a pack of cards for inexplicable reasons. The only constant figures have been two non-political persons, Rajiv Desai, whose expertise as head of a communications agency is often utilised, and Tom Vaddakani, who as media secretary has helped to put the information systems in place.

The Congress should really be looking at ways to develop a hand-picked panel of spokespersons into spin doctors on behalf of the party. These should be media-friendly people who are adept at 'debriefing' and 'selling a party line'. They should also have access to discussions and decisions or they should interact with senior leaders on a regular basis to understand what is going on in the

party and plan how to tackle the press. And they should have the liberty of hobnobbing with the media without being accused of 'leaking' party secrets or being dragged into unnecessary controversies. Between them and select senior leaders, they could certainly bump up the party's profile in the media.

**T**here is a widespread belief that Sonia's aloofness is largely responsible for the bad press the Congress gets. Actually, over the past two years, Sonia has to a great extent shed her diffidence with the media. Today, she is often seen chatting informally with journalists in Parliament House or giving sound bites to television cameras. However, as the top leader of the party, her role must necessarily be limited to making official statements. The packaging and selling of the party and its president has to be done by the others.

Indira Gandhi's metamorphosis from a '*goongi gudiya*' into a saviour for the poor was not just the result of a few good speeches. She nurtured different groups of politically clever young leaders like Mohan Dharia, Chandra Shekhar, Chandrajit Yadav, Mohan Kumaramangalam, among others who were given the task of image building. The controversial decisions she took in those early days, like the abolition of privy purses and bank nationalisation, along with the decidedly socialist turn the Congress took were all given a pro-poor, Left versus Right ideological slant.

Ultimately, this was packaged neatly into the rousing slogan of *garibi hatao*. It took the media and the nation by storm and swept Indira Gandhi to a spectacular majority in the 1971 elections in which she trounced the Syndicate. Ironically, the Congress managed to achieve this despite Indira Gandhi's innate suspicions of the

media with which she had a fairly hostile relationship till the end.

Indira Gandhi was fortunate enough to have around her a large group of astute leaders with sharp political skills and understanding and above all, the capacity for cultivating the media. Most of them were grassroots leaders and spoke a political language. Over the years, the Congress has lost these people. Many left around the time of the Emergency and soon after. Others have been steadily marginalised and replaced by a set of leaders who parachuted into politics from nowhere and represent what has come to be known as the '*babalog*' culture in the Congress. Well spoken as they are, they simply lack a fundamental grasp of politics and the idiom to refurbish the image of the party. For instance, even as it was forced by circumstances to liberalise the economy, the Congress has failed completely to package it for political gains the way Indira Gandhi sold her socialist decisions. It remains apologetic and unsure about its economic policies.

**T**oday, the Congress needs to identify and cultivate another lot of younger politicians who can create and sell a vision for the 21st century. It will have to look for leaders who are well versed not only in political strategy but also in communication, leaders whose roots in mass politics will give them the confidence to tackle the media and win it over. The grey hairs of experience are the voice of caution and must be given due respect. But it is time the Congress made a serious effort to build a second generation of leaders who can mobilise support at the grassroots level for the party and build a movement. The media, which feeds the hunger of an increasingly politically aware people, can be a valuable aide, provided the Congress learns how to operate the levers of news management.

# A sleeping giant

SALMAN KHURSHID

IN many ways Uttar Pradesh was indelibly stamped on the Congress party, just as the party was an intrinsic part of the politics of the state. UP was at the forefront of the national movement, the crucible of its top leadership, and the historic centre of the Congress organisation. Uttar Pradesh provided India with the first four prime ministers. It would of course be an exaggeration to say that UP was the Congress party and the Congress party was UP. But that is indeed how several generations of Congress leaders from UP saw themselves. Now of course everything has changed beyond their imagination and comprehension. The Congress of UP hopes to elect the next prime minister of India but cannot substantiate the numerical muscle that we ought to add to the contribution of the rest of the country.

What exactly happened to UP over the past 15 years since the last Congress government of N.D. Tiwari laid down office? Indeed, what has happened to the UP Congress in these past years?

It is an oft repeated, trite proposition that in the present condition the UP Congress has none of its traditional vote banks—Brahmins, Muslims, and Dalits. The predominance of Brahmin participation and leadership in Congress politics of UP, much as it was criticised by other social groups, particularly OBCs, is historically linked to the nature of the leadership in the national movement. Given their historic social pre-eminence, largely due to widespread educational accomplishments and consequent dominance of social life, a large number of enlightened Brahmins enthusiastically jumped into the national movement. In a sense, their standing as a community of upper caste, control of institutions that shaped and guided public opinion such as schools, colleges and other social organisations, the political leadership by Brahmins was inevitable.

Since the national movement coincided with the Muslim separatist movement that led to Pakistan, it was equally inevitable that nationalist

Muslims, who recoiled from and repudiated Jinnah's two-nation theory, would flock to the Congress party that offered the only alternative. Furthermore, the association of stalwarts like Maulana Azad, Rafi Ahmed Kidwai and Zakir Hussain, all of whom in several ways were seen as role models of 20th century *shurfa* culture of Uttar Pradesh, drew Muslim masses to the Congress party.

National leaders of the Congress, professing in varying degrees the Hindu faith, such as Jawaharlal Nehru and Govind Ballabh Pant, offered to the Muslims of UP special comfort and confidence. Indeed, in repudiating the two-nation theory and the idea of an exclusive spokesperson for their community, the Muslims of UP sought a leader in Jawaharlal Nehru. He in turn was followed in that leadership role by Indira Gandhi and to a somewhat lesser extent the Nehruvian H.N. Bahuguna, who was the first Congress leader to break away with a substantive Muslim following.

**S**omewhat similar to the motivation and aspiration of Muslims of Uttar Pradesh was the situation of the twenty odd per cent of UP's population of Dalits. Mahatma Gandhi's remarkable message of companionship, compassion and common cause with oppressed Dalits gave the community a sense of security and belonging. It need hardly be said that the decision to entrust Baba Bhimrao Ambedkar the chairmanship of the drafting committee for the Constitution of India could not have gone unnoticed by the Dalits all over the country, particularly in Uttar Pradesh. The constitutional instrument of reservation in legislatures and to open up avenues of opportunity in education and state sector jobs, certainly had a major impact on the psyche of the hitherto dispossessed Dalits.

The present predicament and somewhat precarious electoral situation of the once mighty UP Congress can be traced back to the late 1970s and the emergence, first, of a strong anti-Congress socialist movement led by the likes of Ram Manohar Lohia, and subsequently its successor groups like the Janata Dal/Samajwadi Party on the one hand and the Ramjanmabhoomi standard bearer Bharatiya Janata Party (formerly the Jan Sangh) on the other. Although the socialists ran virulent and at times violent campaigns of dissent and defiance against the Congress establishment, their transit from political opposition to the ruling echelons of Uttar Pradesh was not exactly steady and smooth.

**A**fter the initial peaking of their electoral efforts and the installing of the SVD coalition government, and subsequently the governments led by Ram Naresh Yadav and Mulayam Singh Yadav, considerable disarray and fragmentation set in. Innumerable socialists migrated to the Congress party and that included Ram Naresh Yadav himself. This was of course ideologically facilitated by the fact that Indira Gandhi made socialism the main plank of her politics and *garibi hatao* acquired the dimensions of an intense passion.

It is often forgotten that the second coming or the rebirth of both the BJP and the Samajwadi Party took place in the same womb and their nurturing in the same cradle. While Atal Behari Vajpayee and Lal Krishan Advani shared government positions with V.P. Singh and Mufti Mohammed Sayeed at the centre, Mulayam Singh Yadav was party to the government that had another future chief minister of a BJP government, Kalyan Singh. The transformation of the BJP and the Samajwadi Party elements took place on the pseudo libertarian slogans

against the imposition of the Emergency in 1976. Although the issue then was ostensibly democracy and freedom, the fact is that many communalists, who were political untouchables till then, acquired a garb of respectability.

**H**aving crossed the rubicon or *Laxman rekha* of acceptability and respectability, the BJP promptly began to work on a powerful new combination of social groups that took it beyond the traditional structure of a small trader, middle class, urban party. Even as Mulayam Singh Yadav was securing parts of the fragmented backward territories of the late Charan Singh, Kalyan Singh provided a fresh energy to the BJP by combining non-Yadav OBCs (particularly his own community of Lodh Rajputs) with the BJP's traditional voters. Having secured a larger social compact, the BJP and the rest of the Sangh Parivar then sought an ideological cutting edge in the Ramjanmabhoomi movement. UP politics began to polarize between '*Mandal*' and '*Kamandal*'.

While all this was happening on a grand scale, *Manyavar* Kanshi Ram and *Dalit ki beti* Mayawati were busy slogging from village to village with the help of generous resources provided by ambitious and powerful Dalit civil servants. Just as the graffiti of early days of the Ram mandir movement was taken very casually by the establishment in UP, so were the DS-4 slogans treated with scant respect and attention. Throughout this period, Congress policy planners and its UP leadership ironically failed to read the writing on the wall!

For much of the period in which Kanshi Ram and Mayawati built a solid base for an elephantine edifice that would come up in the later years, the Congress party assumed it was enough to have placed a prominent

Dalit Congress leader in the post of the UPCC president, Mahavir Prasad. Similarly, at no point did anyone seriously believe that Muslims would desert the Congress party despite the distressing and disturbing events in Jabalpur, Bhiwandi, Ahmedabad and other places outside Uttar Pradesh, and Maliana and Meerut in the state itself. Riots had come and gone and repeatedly caused trauma. There was a gradual accumulation of disappointment and distress, continuous complaints about the conduct of the PAC, inexplicable insensitivity shown from time to time by administrative officers, and the usual prolonged wait for the pronouncements of commissions of enquiry and the inevitable gathering of dust by the reports they submitted.

**N**evertheless, because of the Congress party's strong traditional interfaith contacts and the unimpeachable secular credentials of its national leadership, much of the growing disquiet was seen as a storm in a teacup. Periodically, the national leadership stepped in with specific programmes and administrative measures to repair the damage and restore confidence. Indira Gandhi's 15 point programme for minorities was one such glorious example. Rajiv Gandhi made strenuous efforts, including the setting up of the Rapid Action Force.

The ripping apart of the political and social fabric that the independence movement Congress generation had strenuously woven happened during the 1989 elections. It followed what should have been a phenomenal five year tenure of a brilliant young prime minister who took office in an act of personal courage at a moment of tragedy. Rajiv Gandhi's election as prime minister, for the second time technically speaking, but in terms of a popular mandate his first, came as

the stunning landslide victory of 1984.

The unfortunate and contrived crises that began about the middle of his tenure and plagued him to the very end, deprived India of a fantastic historic opportunity. The irritation of an extremely nasty and belligerent opposition on the issue of Bofors, coupled with the growing pressure of the BJP and its effective mobilisation of frustrated youth with dreams of Ramraj, put the Congress party under tremendous stress. The election of 1989 was nevertheless an election that was to be won, and was indeed nearly won.

However, a well-meaning step whose consequences were inadequately anticipated, of the *shilanyas* ceremony with the object of defusing Hindu passions, spun out of control leading to wild speculation among both communities. Having surfaced during the election campaign, the issue was ruthlessly and most cynically exploited by the Janata Party, as indeed by the BJP, leading to the Congress slipping from a three-fourths majority in Parliament to being the single largest minority party.

**T**he Janata Dal government that came to power had neither firm convictions nor a clear cut ideology and was inevitably doomed from the beginning. The desperate attempt by the partners to entrench themselves, as also their intense conflicting ambitions were soon to ring the death knell of one Janata Dal government to be followed by another. The Congress lost the election but nobody won. Just as a defeated Indira Gandhi in 1977 remained the tallest leader of India, in 1989 her defeated son Rajiv Gandhi remained far more significant and attractive as a leader in opposition than two successive prime ministers of the Janata Dal, despite their experience and great expertise at political management.

The Janata Dal was of course a makeshift party, an aggregate of temporary marriages of convenience between groups and individuals. Its attention was focused on manipulations in the capital cities and as a result mired the Congress party into the same limited terrain of national politics. Meanwhile, the jettisoned BJP returned to the grassroots in Uttar Pradesh and revived its interrupted Ramjanmabhoomi movement.

**W**hile the Congress focused on Delhi, UP began to slip away quietly. Intense conflict between different Congress leaders of UP on the issue of supporting Mulayam Singh Yadav caused a vertical front line. Ironically, many who opposed Mulayam Singh Yadav bitterly in those years were later to advocate an alliance with him and others who advocated an alliance with him then later turned out to be his severest critics. From the Congress point of view the first betrayal came when Mulayam Singh Yadav dissolved the UP assembly despite assurances to the contrary and directed his political armoury against the Congress party. Thus began a series of forced errors and self-goals by the Congress, causing rapid erosion of its support base and a corresponding dent in its confidence.

In the past ten years the Congress has been in alliance with, or has supported, both the BSP and the Samajwadi Party. Curiously, the average Congress worker reacted negatively to any suggestion of supporting Mulayam Singh, an attitude that has seen very little change over the years. This was not so in case of the BSP. But a hasty pre-poll alliance, giving the BSP a lion's share (or shall be say an elephant's share) of the seats, with the Congress retaining only 126 of the 425 seats, lowered party worker morale considerably. Mayawati's subsequent

betrayal of the Congress to join hands with the BJP was of course a shattering blow. Yet the Congress's empathy for the Dalits, and its fundamental philosophical position that advocacy of the Dalit cause was essentially deserving of support, kept the level of hostility towards the BSP low.

On the other hand, Mulayam Singh has been a virtual red rag to the Congress party workers and curiously much of the opposition to him in recent years has come from those elements among Muslims who, despite the adversity suffered by the Congress, have remained determined to stand by the party patronised by their forefathers and ancestors. While Mayawati's political harangues and speeches were generally directed at 'Manuwadi' structures and, therefore, were easily met by the Congress party's response that this was not directed at them, Mulayam Singh's attacks were more often than not directed at the Congress party.

**T**he truth soon became clear, that the death of Congress in UP would mean life to Mulayam and the survival of the BJP as an ogre and threat would be a convenient ploy to exploit the Muslim sense of insecurity. Mulayam Singh Yadav claims total allegiance of the 8% vote of his Yadav community and needs to dominate 18% vote of the Muslim minority. But the spoils of his politics are seldom distributed in that proportion and indeed do not reflect distributive justice.

Over the past few elections the popular votes of the four main parties in UP have varied over a narrow band; the 'BJP peaked at 35% and dropped to 20% in the last assembly election of 2002; BSP has maintained a steady figure between 21% and 23%; the Samajwadi Party has fluctuated between 29% and 24%; and the Congress has had the most dramatic pendulum

swings going from 6% to 18% in the last parliamentary elections and then dropping back to 9% in the recent assembly poll. Clearly the elasticity of the Congress vote is considerable.

**F**or the last parliamentary elections as Congress moved from 6 to 18%, a major erosion of Mulayam Singh's Muslim vote became apparent. As a result he had to rush to Kalyan Singh for help, giving the latter's right-hand man, Shakshi Maharaj, a seat in the Rajya Sabha. It is ironic that the political leader who so maligned and abused the Congress for using expressions like 'Ram Raj' and for having stood by when the Babri Masjid was demolished, felt no compunction at shaking hands with two central figures in the unpleasant and unholy conspiracy to demolish the ancient mosque.

The continuing drift in the UP Congress and the growing eccentricities in governance of Chief Minister Mayawati has given the Samajwadi Party a whiff of an opportunity of becoming the alternative. It is the main opposition in the UP assembly although its strategy in the House has been puzzling in that there are indications of accommodation of BJP's interests.

But of course there is a war between the SP and BSP. Mulayam Singh retains his hold over the Yadav vote bank and so long as that community continues to feel a threat from other castes that receive political clout from Mayawati, they will not explore other avenues. The chief minister's aggressive moves against Raja Bhaiya have alerted Mulayam Singh's antenna for the Thakur vote bank. In his predictable style, with Amar Singh by his side, he has attempted forays into Rajnath Singh's territory. But there is no conclusive indication of success. Muslims continue to harbour doubts

about his sincerity but do not find an alternative.

On considerations of local influence and practical combination, some continue to follow him, just as some continue to follow Mayawati. In her case the hold over Dalits is remarkably unshakeable. But that is all she has. The grandeur of a dictatorial style gives her a larger than life stature. But the fact is that she is only a BJP decision away from returning to the streets outside the Vidhan Sabha. On balance, for the present the SP may be the steady gainer, but it remains to be seen if its leader can overcome his tendency of periodically scoring self-goals.

**I**t is in the nature of UP politics that specific events and issues matter only to a point. What matters more is the arithmetic of community combinations that promise or hold out a promise of access to power. Perceptions manipulated through effective propaganda using enormous amounts available to three non-Congress parties in UP, backed by captive caste based votes and criminal elements sustained by the same caste system, have taken over the entire political spectrum of the state. As the state falls steadily in terms of economic performance and the human development index, there is no major effort by any of the three non-Congress parties that have ruled in the last 15 years to address the real issues of governance and quality of life. The situation is ripe for the return to the Congress party, but unfortunately there is a vacuum.

The untimely and tragic death of Rajesh Pilot who, although elected from the Rajasthan, was equally at home in Uttar Pradesh where he was born, was a great loss. Again, the sudden demise of the mercurial Jitendra Prasada deprived a significant political group of their friend, philosopher and guide, causing some of them to



seek refuge in other political parties. Thereafter, the departure of Narain Dutt Tiwari to the state of Uttaranchal has left UP bereft of an established upper caste leadership which, in present conditions, perhaps holds the key to the revival of the fortunes of the Congress party.

**T**he dearth of a new generation leadership in the UP Congress may partly be explained by the fact that the departure of several senior leaders could not possibly have been anticipated and therefore no attempt to develop a new line of leadership was made. On the other hand, the very fact that the Congress has been out of power for 15 crucial years, in which both India and the world have undergone dramatic transformation, have left the potential new generation leaders of UP sadly unexposed and uninspired by these cataclysmic changes.

When the first wave of Hindutva hit UP, the Congress seems to have retreated in confusion. When the first reaction came from the minority community, boosted by and indeed instigated by the Samajwadi Party, the Congress was left utterly directionless. The dramatic and dialectical political campaign style of Mayawati and the amazing consistency of allegiance of the Dalit voters towards her, forced the UP Congress to simply give up trying.

When Congress votes surged to 18% in the last parliamentary elections and its seats went up from 0 to 10, it was assumed too easily that the comeback trail had been found. Some people even readied themselves for the spoils of battle. But the fact is that the Congress was simply beginning to move a rusted machine once again. There was indeed much more to be done. The next two years are therefore crucial and critical. The BJP is in decline, the Samajwadi Party has

reached its limit and the BSP is determined to press the self-destruct button. There is space and need for a decent party that can address the issues of governance.

UP is now ripe for a sensible political party that can cut across major caste barriers as well as reach out to minor backward castes to present a viable and seemingly feasible political solution to the utter hopelessness that pervades the state. The Congress party, although at present electorally the weakest, is the only party that fits the bill. Clearly, a major effort will be required to restructure, refurbish, remotivate the traditional Congress support base that survives, albeit truncated, despite 15 years in the wilderness. It is a welcome sign that young faces continue to aspire to enroll in the Congress party, both in urban and in rural areas. It is another matter that there is very slow turnover at the top, causing stagnation and lack of social and political mobility.

**S**everal efforts made in the past five years to rejuvenate the party organization and cadres have shown promising response and results in the initial stages. However, initial successes have not led to successful culmination, except to a limited extent in the last parliamentary election. It is clear that UP calls for innovative political strategies on a war footing. Several times, an attempt to replicate the BJP agenda has backfired. Similarly there is little chance of cloning BSP and SP politics for a resurgent Congress. The Congress will have to provide a unique social formula and an attractive and refashioned political formulation.

While the inability of the Congress to match the extremist slogan-mongering and political machinations of the other three parties appears to be a disadvantage in a divided polity,

this indeed could be turned to its advantage. UP today is a state that has a plummeting record on development, a miserable pretence of a health service, little noticeable fresh investment except perhaps on the outskirts of Delhi, a frightening record of criminal violence and little accountability (there are 10,000 unnatural deaths caused by criminal acts every year), large scale closure of industrial units particularly those that provide value addition for agriculture crops, almost the highest level of adult illiteracy, and so on. A party that can claim a record of good governance in more than a dozen states of the country can spark off a dramatic and rapid change of mood and political preference in the state.

**T**he important thing for the Congress is to accept and understand the new social realities and then respond appropriately with an economic programme that creates new political majorities. Time-tested traditional Congress systems obviously will have to be retained but the party will have to learn to reach out to other than those already converted. Outreach and securing attention of constituencies that have either traditionally neglected the Congress or have left the Congress in the last 20 years would have to be a high priority.

Whatever else the Congress plans for reviving its fortunes in UP, it will inevitably have to address the caste conundrum. As noticed above, a quick turnaround of Dalits seems unlikely; the main OBCs remain committed to their community leaders, who in turn remain enamoured with the idea of securing crucial negotiating strength; Thakurs are sulking and looking for someone who can open an aggressive front against the Dalits, not a palatable idea for the Congress; and the non-Yadav OBCs,



such as Kurmi and Lodh, are too thinly scattered to make a conspicuous difference.

To put the caste equations into a tumble-wash the Congress has to look to Brahmins who are not only disenchanted but, in their own perception, disempowered. They were once the backbone of the Congress along with Dalits and Muslims. They can and appear to be ready to return home. Muslims have substantially forgiven the Congress for the events of early '90s and are overtly concerned about recent events, particularly Gujarat. But they remain tied in some places to the larger than Congress presence of SP and BSP.

Elsewhere the emergence of a new rich trader class leadership among Muslims keeps them in two minds. But they are now looking for signals from the Congress, not so much about themselves but about the Congress itself. Brahmins and Muslims are also looking at each other for who will make the first move. For the Congress in UP the challenge is to be able to say, 'We are back to stay, we are back to win.' The voters in UP cannot believe in the Congress unless they can see that the Congress believes in itself.

Many Congress workers believe that there are very special trump cards in our hands whose introduction into the political arena of UP will bring about a dramatic and instant transformation. However, it still remains that even for the introduction of those major catalysts of change, considerable groundwork and preparation is necessary. Not only will this possibly speed up those much awaited events, but also place the Congress in a position to take maximum advantage when they happen. The greatest asset for the Congress in this endeavour is the general feeling that UP must move if India is to move and that UP will not really move without the Congress.

# The new Congress voter

YOGENDRA YADAV

IT has been a great temptation to tell Congress leaders and workers who the Congress voter is. You might say they know it all. Possibly a Congress worker and local leader have a fair sense of who their supporters are in their locality. But it is unlikely if the same can be said about the state level and national level leadership. If they do, their actions often fail to betray this understanding.

While we live in a post-Congress polity, the Congress leaders continue to behave as if the grand old era of the Congress system continues uninterrupted, as if the last 10 years never happened. Some of them still live the day-dreams of a single party majority. They plan and strategise as if they are still a catch-all party representing all sections of society. Hence my desire to write a Rough Guide to a Post-Congress Polity.

I will try to turn this invitation from *Seminar* into an occasion to look at who the Congress voter is and why this piece of information may be of some relevance. I will draw upon a wide range of survey evidence gathered by the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS) over the last four decades, for survey data constitutes the most reliable piece of evidence to discuss voting behaviour.

## I

Let us begin with a simple overview. Table 1 presents the data for Congress voting by community in the four general elections that took place in the 1990s. This period is often described as the post-Congress polity, for Congress

ceased to be the central pole around which political competition was structured in the country. A look at the Congress vote in the 1991 election shows a fairly even spread. The party secured 37% votes in the country.

Its votes among the various social groups classified here is fairly close to this average. The vote share dips by 5 percentage points among the Hindu OBCs, a weakness that goes back to the 1960s when the party began to lose the political support of the middle peasant castes, especially in north India. The only high point in this column is that the adivasi vote is 8 points higher than the Congress average. All other groups, including upper caste Hindus, dalits and the Muslims are within a two percentage point band around the average of 37%.

This may not be a textbook illustration of a 'catch-all formation' that draws the same level of support from all sections of society. But the shadows of a catch-all party are clearly visible. In the heydays of the Congress, Prannoy Roy and David Butler had proposed a '10% band'. The proposition was that Congress vote among different sections of society falls within a range of 10 percentage points – from 5 points plus to 5 points minus – of its average vote share. The rule could be applied to the picture we see for the 1991 election, with adivasis placed just outside the band.

From this starting point, let us look at the changes depicted in the same table. By the time we come to the 1996 election, the first election with-

out the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty, the Congress votes drop by nearly 8 percentage points. Notably, the drop was not even across different social groups. The loss among the adivasis and Muslims (even in this first election after Babri Masjid demolition) was only 4 points each, while the party lost nearly 10 points each among the upper castes and the OBCs. Adivasis and the OBCs had by then moved outside the 10% band.

**T**he next two elections came in quick succession. The overall vote of the Congress dipped further by 3 points in 1998 only to spring back to the same level in 1999. But the social composition of the Congress voter underwent a change. Its votes among the Hindu upper caste declined with each election. On the other hand, the Muslim anger subsided and compulsions of political choice steadily brought them back to the Congress. There was a little recovery among the OBCs as well. There were no further losses for the Congress among dalits and adivasis during these two elections.

**TABLE 1**

Congress Vote by Community <i>Lok Sabha Elections 1991-99</i>				
	1991	1996	1998	1999
Hindu upper	36	27	20	16
Hindu OBC	32	22	21	27
Dalit	39	32	27	32
Adivasi	45	41	38	40
Muslim	38	34	43	50
All	37	29	26	29

Source for Table 1, 2 and 3: National Election Study (NES) 1996, NES 1998, NES 1999, all conducted by the CSDS. The figures reported here are from the post-poll surveys with a sample size of 9614 (NES 1996), 8166 (NES 1998) and 9418 (NES 1999).

Note: Figures for 1991 are based on respondents' recall in NES 1996 and are therefore subject to greater than usual errors. The reported vote has been weighted by actual vote share to eliminate survey errors. But this does not make any difference to the pattern of sectional voting as reported here.

During these 10 years the Congress has come a long way from the catch-all formation it once was. While it lost about 8 points in overall terms, its loss among the upper caste Hindus was as high as 20 percentage points. The Congress is the weakest not among the OBCs, but among the upper caste, socially the most privileged group. At the turn of the century the Congress no longer enjoyed the confidence of the social group it had worked with throughout the 20th century to bring itself to power. It began to look like a 'cleavage based party', a party that draws most of its votes from some social groups and not from others. Its vote share among the adivasis, Muslims and upper castes is now way beyond a 10% or even 20% band.

**T**he picture of voting by different economic groups in Table 2 tells a similar story. In 1991, the vote for the Congress was evenly spread, even more so than in Table 1. Between 1991 and 1996, the Congress votes underwent steep erosion among the well-to-do or the 'high' class in this categorization. This high class is the same as the so-called 'middle' class in popular imagination (not to be confused with the middle group in our classification; a member of this group falls truly in the centre of the income and asset based hierarchy of Indian population and dreams of owning a two-wheeler).

The Congress votes in this group went down by 16 percentage points between the two elections. Rarely does such a sharp erosion take place in a short period and that too for a group that is not tied together by primordial bonds. This incidentally was the period when the Congress government had given a U-turn to the country's economic policy. The 'high' class constitute precisely those who bene-

fited from the New Economic Policy. The beneficiaries of the NEP had deserted their political benefactors even before the first generation of economic 'reforms' were over.

**I**ronically it is precisely the victims of these reforms at the bottom of the class hierarchy who stayed more loyal to the Congress than other groups. The exact pattern varied from election to election. The 1998 election appeared to have reduced class differences in voting. But by the end of the decade, we see a clear pattern emerging. The vote for the Congress has a clear, almost textbook like, slope: the lower a person is placed in the class hierarchy, the higher his or her chances of voting for the Congress. The slope is not steep, but the relationship and its direction is unmistakable. Caste and its association with voting has invited so much popular and professional attention in the last 10 years that we are in a danger of forgetting how clear the line of class division is when it comes to voting.

Let us introduce one more variable at this stage. It is widely believed, and there is some evidence to support this view, that in its years of glory the Congress got substantially more votes among women than among men. Right from the '60s, we know that a disproportionately large number of supporters of 'Opposition' parties were men.

**TABLE 2**

Congress Vote by Class <i>Lok Sabha Elections 1991-99</i>				
	1991	1996	1998	1999
High	39	23	27	23
Middle	37	27	25	28
Low	36	30	26	29
Lowest	37	31	26	31
All	37	29	26	29

Note: Class has been defined here with reference to occupation, house type and assets of the respondents. See appendix to Heath and Yadav (1999) for details.

This trend continued through the '70s and '80s. Table 3 present the trends for the 1990s. By the time we come to the beginning of the '90s, this gap is not visible. Although the evidence is somewhat deficient on this point, it seems that some political changes in the late '80s and early '90s led to an erosion of the Congress support among women.

In 1991 the Congress secured 4 percentage points more among men than women, very unusual for the Congress. Its opponents did better among women. By 1996, the deficit had disappeared, yet the Congress had no gender advantage: it got the same proportion of votes among men and women. But it was already doing a little better in this respect than the BJP and allies. The 1998 and the 1999 elections saw the Congress recover something of its traditional advantage among women.

**B**y 1999, the Congress vote share was 3 points higher among women as compared to men. One may be tempted to link it with the arrival of Sonia Gandhi to the political centre-stage. But this subject remains to be explored adequately. All we know is that by the end of 1990s, a substantial gender division in voting had opened up. If viewed in terms of the difference between the Congress' advantage and the NDA's disadvantage, the gap was around 9 percentage points.

If we review the national picture in terms of all these three divisions, then the Congress turned from a catch-all party to something of a cleavage based party in the 1990s. It was no longer the party of a rainbow coalition, even granting that its rainbow was always thick at the ends and there was a gender dimension to its support. In the 1990s the slices of its rainbow were beginning to come apart.

The Congress was never a party of the OBCs, and it did not become so

in the 1990s. But the cumulative result of a process of uneven erosion was that the Congress was now the party whose voters were more likely to be dalit, adivasi, Muslim and poor than ever before and as much likely to be women as in the past. Still, for someone used to looking at cross-country data on voting by social cleavages, the national picture does not appear to be that of sharp social divisions.

## II

**T**he picture that we have analysed thus far suffers from several limitations. First and foremost, it is presented at an artificial level of aggregation. We know that Indian politics in the 1990s was no longer played at the national level; states had become the effective unit of political choice. The national figures hide the real story at the state level. We need to know if the story at the state level follows the same contours. For the same reason the national level data does not offer us good clues about the why and how of sectional mobilization, for the real action lies at the state level. Finally, stopping the story in 1999 does not tell us much about some of the most pressing questions staring everyone in the face in the run up to the next Lok Sabha elections. What has been the trend since the last Lok Sabha elections? What are the lessons for the Congress in the next Lok Sabha elections?

It is by now an established wisdom that the Congress' profile at the state level is different from that of its national level. Working on the data from the 1967 Lok Sabha election,

1. Pradeep K. Chhibber and John R. Petrocick, 'Social Cleavages, Elections and the Indian Party System' in Richard Sisson and R. Roy (eds.) *Diversity and Dominance in Indian Politics*, vol 1, Sage, New Delhi, 1990.

2. Anthony Heath and Yogendra Yadav, 'The United Colours of Congress: Social Profile of Congress Voters, 1996 and 1998', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 21-28 August 1999.

Chhibber and Petrocick<sup>1</sup> had argued that the Congress was never a 'catch-all' formation at the state level and that its support was more unevenly distributed at that level. Anthony Heath and I had extended that line of reasoning and modified it by looking at the profile of the Congress voter across different categories of states in the 1996 and the 1998 Lok Sabha elections.<sup>2</sup> The main conclusions of that research are worth recalling here:

'Congress support changes from one type of contest to another. While the all-India figures show relatively little variation in support from one community group to another, we find much bigger variation once we disaggregate. Moreover, the pattern varies from one type of contest to another, but the differences tend to cancel out at the all-India level. Thus in competition with the BJP including its regional allies, the Congress comes out as a party of the socially and economically marginalized. The same party is supported by the socially and economically privileged when it competes with the left. While it retains a catch-all character in some states where it faces all-regional parties, it declines into a catch-none formation when it is pushed from more than one direction by various cleavage based parties' (Heath and Yadav 1990: 2526).

We have already noticed one change since this snapshot was taken:

TABLE 3

Congress Vote by Gender Lok Sabha Elections 1991-99				
	1991	1996	1998	1999
Women	37	29	27	30
Men	41	29	26	27
Gender advantage -	4	0	+1	+3

Note: 'Gender advantage' here means the percentage point lead for the Congress among women as compared to men in terms of its reported vote share. A negative sign indicates that its vote share was higher among men. The recall of women respondents for 1991 voting was comparatively poor and may have affected the data about their voting pattern.

unlike then, the all-India picture of the 1999 Lok Sabha election already shows clear cleavage lines. We need to see if this is reflected in the state level competition since then. Besides, both the studies mentioned above have drawn upon the Lok Sabha election data. Let us turn to information at the state level in the last assembly election for all the major states. This information has become available for the first time through a series of surveys based on probability sample undertaken by the CSDS for all the major assembly elections that have taken place since 1996.

Table 4 presents the data on voting by community for 18 states. It uses the same five categories of social communities as used in Table 1 for the Lok Sabha data so as to facilitate a comparison among different states and between the all-India and the state level picture. In order to facilitate quick reading of the data and to neutralize the effect of the ups and downs of the party in different elections, the data is reported here as deviations from the mean. In other words, instead of reporting the vote share of the Congress among different groups (as done in Table 1 and 2), the table simply reports how much the Congress was 'up' or 'down' in a social group compared to its average vote in that state in that particular election.

**A** first look at the table confirms the thesis that variations at the state level are substantially higher than those seen in national level aggregates. There are a large number of double digit variations, indicating the presence of sharper social cleavages at this level. A first glance also reveals some clear overall patterns. The column for 'upper castes' shows negative signs in all but four cases; similarly the column for dalits and Muslims reports mostly positive and large entries. The

evidence for OBCs and adivasis is more mixed, as there are both kinds of entries.

At a general plane then one can conclude that the Congress is as weak among the upper caste and OBCs and much stronger among the dalits and Muslims than indicated by the all-India data in Table 1. The evidence for adivasis does not affirm the conclusion that follows from the all-India table. Although there are significant state-wide variations here, it seems the Congress cannot take the adivasis for granted in the assembly elections ana-

lysed here. We do not know if this is due to a change since 1999 or because of the different level of analysis.

A close look at the table shows three groups of states in terms of their patterns of vote for Congress. The first group of states includes most of the states with a direct Congress-BJP contest or that involving almost a direct contest between Congress and the NDA. But this group also includes Andhra Pradesh and excludes Madhya Pradesh. The social profile of the Congress in these states is characterized by weaker than average support among

TABLE 4

Congress Vote by Community: State Assembly Elections, 1998-2003						
State and election year	Deviation from party's average vote share among					Average vote share
	Upper caste	Hindu OBC	Dalit	Adivasi	Muslim	
<i>Party of dalit, adivasi and minority; distrusted by the upper caste Hindus</i>						
Delhi 1998	- 10	+ 2	+15		+ 24	48
Uttaranchal 2002	- 5	0	+13	+ 9	+ 1	27
Himachal 2003	- 7	- 2	+14		+ 36	40
Gujarat 2002	- 24	+ 4	+30	+ 8	+ 25	40
Maharashtra 1999	- 4	- 2	+20	- 3	+ 6	30
Karnataka 1999	- 12	- 11	+ 6	- 5	+ 38	45
Rajasthan 1998	- 7	- 10	+15	- 2	+ 27	45
Andhra Pradesh 1999	- 2	- 5	+20	- 11	+ 11	43
Orissa 2000	- 9	- 2	+ 7	+ 1	+ 27	34
Haryana 2000	- 4	+ 5	+18		- 10	31
<i>Variations of the same profile with some difference</i>						
Madhya Pradesh 1998	- 7	- 5	- 5	+ 7	+ 44	40
Assam 2001	- 12	0	- 4	- 14	+ 18	40
Punjab 2002	+ 17	+19	+ 4			38
Kerala 2001	0	- 19	- 14	- 17	+ 14	47
<i>Lack of a clear social profile</i>						
Tamil Nadu 2001	- 3	- 1	- 2		+ 11	4
West Bengal 2001	- 5	+ 3	- 3	- 9	+ 12	12
Bihar 2000	+ 6	- 5	0	+ 24	- 4	11
Uttar Pradesh 2002	+ 9	- 3	- 3		+ 1	9

Source for Tables 4-6: State election surveys undertaken at the time of state assembly elections by the CSDS. For Maharashtra, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh, the data is from the question on the assembly elections in the NES 1999. The data for assembly elections held in 1998 is from exit polls with sample around 5000. All the remaining surveys were post-poll surveys conducted after polling but before counting of votes. The sample size varied between 1,000 and 2,000. The methodological and sampling details for each of the survey are available from CSDS. The reported vote has been weighted by actual vote share to eliminate survey errors. But this does not make any difference to the pattern of sectional voting as reported here.

Note for Table 4 and 5: Table entries are for percentage point deviation in each category from the mean vote share for the Congress in that state in the relevant election. For example, Congress's overall vote share in Delhi assembly election was 48 per cent. But the survey indicates that it secured only 38 per cent votes among the upper caste. This has been reported in the table as '- 10'. Among dalit voters, 63 per cent reported voting for the Congress; it has been depicted here as '+ 15'. The same principle is followed in all the table entries.

the upper caste Hindus and Hindu OBCs in that order. Almost without exception the Congress does substantially better among dalits and Muslims than its average support level. All states except Gujarat with significant adivasi populations show that the Congress is weaker among them. There are variations. The distrust of the Congress among the upper castes is not high in states like Haryana and Andhra Pradesh where political divisions among non-dvijas are more salient.

**T**he Congress performs relatively better among the OBCs in a state like Gujarat with a dynamic OBC leader and in Haryana where the dominant peasant community is not an OBC. The level of support among the dalits and Muslims is consistently and substantially higher than the average in all these states. Uttaranchal and Maharashtra register a lower level for Muslims for there is an alternative pro-Muslim formation in the form of SP and NCP respectively in these two states. Maharashtra, Rajasthan and Andhra Pradesh, three states with substantial adivasi population, register a lower than average support for the Congress among the adivasis, something that must cause anxiety to the Congress leadership.

The second group has states that appear to have a different profile, but once we put the data in the local context we can see that this profile is simply an extension of the basic principle underlying the first group. Madhya Pradesh falls in the second group, for unlike any other state in the first group the dalit vote for the Congress is significantly lower than average. This is due to the rise of the BSP in the northern belt of the state that borders Uttar Pradesh.

Since this phenomenon is confined to a region within the state and

the BSP has shown signs of decline after an initial breakthrough, this deviation may not alter the social profile of the Congress voter on an enduring basis. In Punjab, the Congress does better among the upper caste and OBC Hindus, but this has little to do with their caste and more to do with their status as a religious minority. Keeping with the pattern reported for group one, the Congress does very poorly (13 points below the state average) among the real dominant community of the state, the Jat Sikhs.

In Kerala too, the Congress led UDF is the preferred political choice of religious minorities. While the coalition does poorly among OBCs, dalits and adivasis, it makes up with a heavy support from Muslims and Christians (18 percentage points above the state average). In Assam, the Congress makes up for its weakness

among all Hindu communities and adivasis by doing very well among Muslims and a large number of 'others', presumably outsiders who do not fit into local categories. While deviating from the standard picture, the Congress retains its character as a party of the socially marginalized in all these states.

Finally we have the third category in which the Congress is not a party of those from the social margins. It represents the privileged groups or lacks a clear social profile. In Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, whatever is left of the Congress vote is now more concentrated among the upper castes than among the OBCs or dalits. In Bihar, the Congress did well among the adivasis, but with the formation of Jharkhand that vote will no longer be available to it. Squeezed from both ends by rival political formations,

TABLE 5

Congress Vote by Class: State Assembly Elections, 1998-2003					
State and elections	Deviation from party's average vote share among different classes				Average vote share
	High	Middle	Lower	Lowest	
<i>Party of the downtrodden: the lower the class, the higher the vote</i>					
Delhi 1998	- 15	- 9	+ 3	+ 10	48
Karnataka 1999	- 9	- 5	- 3	+ 13	45
Assam 2001	- 14	- 5	+ 3	+ 4	40
Gujarat 2002	- 10	+ 1	+ 5	+ 8	40
Madhya Pradesh 1998	- 6	- 1	0	+ 4	40
Uttaranchal 2002	- 7	- 1	+ 10	+ 7	27
Orissa 2000	- 5	+ 1	0	+ 3	34
Punjab 2002	- 9	+ 4	+ 4	+ 11	38
Haryana 2000	- 4	+ 1	+ 3	+ 4	31
Rajasthan 1998	0	- 6	+ 2	+ 5	45
<i>A mixed profile: no sharp deviations, tends to better in the middle</i>					
Maharashtra 1999	- 3	+ 3	- 3	+ 1	30
Andhra Pradesh 1999	0	+ 9	0	- 5	43
Himachal 2003	- 2	+ 8	- 2	- 7	40
Bihar 2000	- 1	+ 1	- 1	+ 2	11
West Bengal 2001	- 3	- 2	+ 1	0	12
<i>A party of the well heeled: the higher the class, the higher the vote</i>					
Uttar Pradesh 2002	+ 5	+ 2	- 4	- 7	9
Kerala 2001	+ 9	+ 4	- 3	- 7	47
Tamil Nadu 2001	+ 13	+ 1	0	- 2	4

Note: Class has been defined here following the same principle as in Table 2. But the exact definition may vary from state to state depending on the availability of information and on the distribution of respondents.

Congress is a catch-none formation in these two states now.

The splits and the marginalisation of the Congress in Tamil Nadu and West Bengal has left it as a party without a clear social profile. It does worse among both the upper castes and dalits and gathers much of its tiny support base from some Muslim pockets. No wonder these distortions in social profile of the Congress have been accompanied by the complete political marginalisation of the party.

**W**hen we turn to class divisions at the state level, we notice a similar though not identical pattern. A first glance at Table 5 shows that the class slope at the state level is steeper than what the all-India table suggested. The pattern is more uniform here. In all but three states, the Congress vote goes up as one goes down the class hierarchy. The class division in voting is sharper in some of the more prosperous states like Delhi, Karnataka, Gujarat and Punjab, though the Congress split in Maharashtra has pushed it outside this category.

It is not an accident that the Congress rules in the top five states in this table characterized by the sharpest class cleavages. Poorer states like Orissa, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan have a less sharp division, but the direction of the slope is identical. Some states show a more mixed profile, either because the Congress is stronger among the better-off sections in rural areas as in Maharashtra, Andhra and Himachal or because the rump Congress has no clear profile at all, as in Bihar and West Bengal.

In three out of the 18 states analysed here, we find a reverse slope: Congress does better among the well-off and worse among the poor. In Uttar Pradesh and Tamil Nadu it is accompanied by electoral disasters for the party. Kerala is a genuine excep-

tion, like in so many other aspects. The aggressive mobilization of the poor by the Left Front has turned the Congress-led coalition into a political formation of the better-off without leading to the electoral demise of the Congress. With the sole exception of Kerala then, it appears that the fortune of the Congress is linked to its capacity to mobilize the poor and the very poor.

The pattern of gender cleavages is straightforward, though the reasons underlying it are far from clear. Table 6 shows that Congress enjoys 'gender advantage' (that is, its vote share is higher among women than among men) in all but four states. This advantage exceeds the national average in states like Karnataka, Maharashtra, Delhi, Kerala, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan. The Congress won in all these states in the elections that the data is drawn from.

Then there are the other states where the Congress enjoys a more moderate advantage. Out of seven of these states, the Congress won only three. The last category is of states where the Congress gets a lower proportion of votes among women than it does among men. The reasons appear to be very different: from TDP's and CPM's successful political mobilization of women to the patternlessness of the Congress in Tamil Nadu and Uttar Pradesh. But the consequence is the same: Congress lost in all these states. This simple index of gender advantage turns out to be the best predictor of the political fortune of the Congress in different states.

### III

**T**he profile of the new Congress voter can now be easily summarized. The new Congress voter in the post-Congress polity is more likely than ever before to be a socially and eco-

nomically marginalized citizen: someone at the receiving end of the caste, communal, class and gender hierarchy. The new Congress voters are not new in the sense of coming from social groups that have never voted for the Congress. All these groups are known to be traditional Congress supporters. What is new about the profile of the Congress voter is the salience and the visibility that these groups have now come to command. An examination of the patterns of the Congress voter at the state level also alerts us to the strong relationship between the social profile of the Congress and its political fate. It does well in states where it is the party of the socially marginalized groups; wherever it has lost its grip on the marginal groups, it has been pushed to political marginalization.

TABLE 6

Gender Advantage for Congress in State Assembly Elections, 1998-2003	
State and Election	Congress Gender Advantage
<i>Strong advantage... Congress rules</i>	
Karnataka 1999	+ 11
Maharashtra 1999	+ 9
Delhi 1998	+ 7
Kerala 2001	+ 6
Madhya Pradesh 1998	+ 4
Rajasthan 1998	+ 4
<i>Moderate advantage... a fair chance</i>	
Gujarat 2002	+ 3
Bihar 2000	+ 3
Himachal 2003	+ 3
Uttaranchal 2002	+ 2
Orissa 2000	+ 2
Haryana 2000	+ 2
Assam 2001	0
<i>Disadvantage... Congress is out</i>	
Tamil Nadu 2001	- 1
West Bengal 2001	- 1
Uttar Pradesh 2002	- 2
Andhra Pradesh	- 3

Note: As in Table 3, 'Gender advantage' here means the percentage point lead for the Congress among women as compared to men in terms of its reported vote share. A negative sign indicates that its vote share was higher among men.

This simple reading of these three variables separately raises some further questions. Is there a relationship between the first two variables? Is the apparent class slope nothing but a reflection of the caste hierarchy? What exactly is the cause-effect relationship? Does a decline of the Congress lead to distortions in its social profile or is the changing social profile the reason why the Congress is going down? How does one interpret the concentration of the Congress vote among the socially marginalized: as a cause for worry or a sign of hope? What exactly are the implications of the evidence presented above for the Congress strategy? Should it focus on regaining what it has lost or on retaining what it has today? Can it gain additional votes from these sections, or has it reached a saturation point?

**A**llow me to postpone some of the deeper and complex but academic questions to another occasion and say something about the last set of pressing political questions that relate to the strategy that the Congress must adopt in the short run leading to the next general elections. Theoretically speaking, the Congress has two options. The first option is to try to recreate the rainbow coalition of the days of the Congress system. This would involve working to reduce its deficit areas: upper castes, the well-off and men.

The second option is to focus on retaining and building on what it has got now. This would involve a focus on retaining and strengthening its base in its existing social constituencies: the OBCs, dalits, adivasis, Muslims, poor and women.

The option is only theoretical, for no party can develop its social profile in isolation from what others are doing. During the decade that we have examined, the BJP has deve-

loped a 'social bloc' of upper caste and upper class that serves as a natural base for its electoral success. The Congress can in the long run work to erode this bloc, but the option of smashing it in the next one year simply does not exist. The Congress has no option except to create a counter-bloc.

**I**n a party system where the biggest political coalition pursues a cleavage based mobilization, its opponents have no option in the short run except to use the same cleavage to turn the tables. In other words, if the Congress wishes to survive in national politics, it must learn to effectively mobilize the marginalized and the deprived. The Congress may have reached something of a saturation point among the Muslims in a few states, but for all other groups and most of the states it is far from that. It can and must mobilize these groups more than it does today.

One last point. Mobilising the poor and the marginalized is not just a matter of declaring a grand intent. It has clear implications for the party's political agenda, its leadership choices and its coalition strategies. Such a move is completely at odds with the more than enthusiastic support that the Congress has extended to the second generation of economic 'reforms' and disinvestment policies and similar policies being pursued by its own state governments. It does not go well with the old and tired upper caste leadership that still dominates the Congress organization in many parts of the country. And it demands a clear thinking about how to develop enduring coalitions with the political formations that already have mobilized these sections. A recognition of the new Congress voter requires nothing short of the reconstruction of a new Congress.



# A timeline of Congress history

## The Foundation Years

- Demand for equitable government through administrative reforms
- Concern for the removal of poverty
- Resolutions deploring: The growing impoverishment of the people; The wealth of the country being drained away; The condition of the ryots steadily deteriorating since 1848 – nearly 40 million people having only one meal a day and sometimes not even that.
- Annual sessions of the Congress party held in different venues every year.
- Provincial conferences organised to foster countrywide involvement.
- Concrete steps taken to organise public opinion in Great Britain in favour of the Indian viewpoint.
- Thrust on seeking representation in government.
- Madan Mohan Malaviya – ‘No taxation without representation’

## Events

July 1889: Formation of British Committee of the Indian National Congress with offices in London to put pressure on Parliament in Great Britain.

Sessions	Venues	Presidents
1885	Bombay	W.C. Bonnerjee
1886	Calcutta	Dadabhai Naoroji
1887	Madras	Badruddin Tyabji
1888	Allahabad	George Yule
1889	Bombay	Sir William Wedderburn
1890	Calcutta	Sir Pherozeshah Mehta
1891	Nagpur	P. Ananda Charlu

1892: Dadabhai Naoroji elected to British Parliament.	1892	Allahabad	W.C. Bonnerjee
India Councils Act a major victory for Congress,	1893	Lahore	Dadabhai Naoroji
but it still did not envisage elected representation.	1894	Madras	Alfred Webb

### Consolidation and Beyond

• Demand for fiscal responsibility • Demand for Indianisation of services • Protest against economic emasculation • Government insensitive to natural disasters – famine, plague, floods • Lokmanya Tilak works for the famine affected populace of Pune – accused of inciting violence by his writings in 'Kesari' – imprisoned • The Curzon Vice Royalty – many repressive measures • Sedition Act curbing the elementary liberties of the people • Official Secrets Act with burden of proof of innocence shifted onto the accused • Protest against proposed Partition of Bengal along communal lines.

1896: Resolution blaming the British for creating famines.	1895	Pune	Surendranath Bannerjee
	1896	Calcutta	Rahimtulla M. Sayani
	1897	Amravati	C. Sankaran Nair
1899: First party constitution framed.	1898	Madras	Ananda Mohan Bose
1900: British reaction to growing Congress movement – curb availability of education to Indians; universities act seeks to limit spread of English education.	1899	Lucknow	Romesh Chander Dutta
1901: Mahatma Gandhi appears on the Congress platform for the first time seeking support for the struggle in South Africa.	1900	Lahore	N.G. Chandavarkar
	1901	Calcutta	Sir Dinshaw Eduljee Wacha
	1902	Ahmedabad	Surendranath Bannerjee
	1903	Madras	Lalmohan Ghosh
	1904	Bombay	Sir Henry Cotton

### Demand for Self-government

• Reaction to the Curzon regime • Widespread protests against the Partition of Bengal, blatantly promoted by Lord Curzon as the creation of a Muslim enclave • Confrontation between the moderates in the Congress seeking change through constitutional means and peaceful agitation and the extremist younger elements seeking change through violence if necessary.

1906: Demand for Swaraj, boycott of British goods.	1905	Benaras	Gopal Krishna Gokhale
1907: First split in Congress between moderates and extremists – the moderates retain control of the organisation.	1906	Calcutta	Dadabhai Naoroji
	1907	Surat	Rashbihari Ghosh
1909: Minto-Morley reforms creating the India Councils gave representation, but also gave impetus to the virus of communalism by providing for separate electorates.	1908	Madras	Rashbihari Ghosh
1909: First signs of strain in Hindu-Muslim relations.	1909	Lahore	Madan Mohan Malaviya
1911: The Partition of Bengal is annulled.	1910	Allahabad	Sir William Wedderburn
	1911	Calcutta	Bishan Narayan Dar
	1912	Bankipur	R.N. Mudholkar

1913	Karachi	Nawab Syed Mohd. Bahadur
1914	Madras	Bhupendra Nath Bose

### **The Foundations of Independent India**

• The Home Rule movement • The advent of Gandhi • The Khilafat movement • The Non-cooperation movement.

1915	Bombay	Lord S.P. Sinha	
1916: Lucknow Pact between the Congress and the Muslim League.	1916	Lucknow	Ambica Charan Mazumdar
1917: Proposal for a Congress flag (later to become the national tricolour).	1917	Calcutta	Annie Besant
1917: Principle of linguistic division accepted – foundation for the eventual creation of states by linguistic identity.			
1917: Gandhiji introduces satyagraha as a potent weapon of political protest in Champaran.			
1918: Satyagraha in Gujarat successful.	1918	Bombay	Syed Hasan Imam
	1918	Delhi	Madan Mohan Malaviya
1919: Jallianwala Bagh massacre.	1919	Amritsar	Motilal Nehru
1920: Khilafat movement.	1920	Calcutta	Lala Lajpat Rai
1920: Gandhiji tours the country to organise the Non-cooperation movement.	1920	Nagpur	C. Vijayaraghavachariar
1920: The Congress becomes a mass movement.			
1920: The country united under Mahatma Gandhi.			
	1921	Ahmedabad	Hakim Ajmal Khan
1922: Gandhiji arrested.	1922	Gaya	Deshbandhu C.R. Das
	1923	Kakinada	Maulana Mohd. Ali
	1923	Delhi	Maulana Abul Kalam Azad
1924: Gandhiji's 21 day fast against communal disturbances.	1924	Belgaum	Mahatma Gandhi

### **The Demand for Complete Independence**

• Gandhi-Irwin Pact • Definition of fundamental rights.

1925: Adoption of Hindi as the official language for the AICC sessions.	1925	Kanpur	Sarojini Naidu
1926: Announcement of Simon Commission for proposing constitutional reforms for India.	1926	Gauhati	S. Srinivasa Iyengar
1927: Resolution boycotting the Simon Commission.	1927	Madras	Mukhtar Ahmed Ansari
1928: Successful all-India hartal on arrival of Simon Commission.	1928	Calcutta	Motilal Nehru
1928: All party committee appointed under Motilal Nehru to draft a constitution for independent India.			
1928: Bardoli satyagraha successful under Sardar Patel.			
1929: Irwin-Gandhi talks.	1929	Lahore	Jawaharlal Nehru
1929: Resolution demanding complete independence.			
1930: Adoption of 26 January as 'purna swaraj day'.	1930		
1930: Call for civil disobedience.			
1930: Salt satyagraha – Dandi march.			
1930: All major Congress leaders arrested.			

1930: AICC Working Committee declared unlawful body.			
1930: Congress opposition to Round Table conference.			
1931: Fundamental rights defined.	1931	Karachi	Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel
1931: AICC Working Committee members released – Congress invited by Viceroy to join deliberations for the future of India.			
1931: Gandhi authorised to negotiate on behalf of the Congress.			
1931: Gandhi-Irwin Pact.			
1931-32: Repression by the British and resumption of the struggle. Gandhiji arrested.			
1932: Poona agreement guaranteeing reserved seats for the Scheduled Castes and Tribes.	1932	Delhi	Madan Mohan Malaviya
1933: Gandhiji on fast for 21 days for the cause of the Harijans.	1933	Calcutta	Nellie Sengupta
1934: Gandhiji withdraws from the Congress.	1934	Bombay	Rajendra Prasad
1934: Congress constitution amended to make non-violence and khadi its fundamental creeds.			

### The Final Stage

• The demand for immediate freedom • Mass satyagraha

1935: The Government of India Act.	1935	Lucknow	Jawaharlal Nehru
1935: Gandhiji decides to concentrate on social reform.			
1935: Congress condemns the new Constitution but decides to contest elections.			
1936: Nehru's presidential address condemns fascism.	1936	Faizpur	Jawaharlal Nehru
1937: Congress wins elections in 5 out of 9 provinces.	1937		
	1938	Haripura	Subhas Chandra Bose
1939: Resignation of Congress ministries and withdrawal from the legislative process.	1939	Tripura	Subhas Chandra Bose
1939: Demand for a constituent assembly to be elected by universal franchise.			
1940: Non-cooperation in the war effort.	1940	Ramgarh	Maulana Abul Kalam Azad
1940: Call for a national government.			
	1941		
1942: 9 August 1942 Quit India Resolution.	1942		
1942: Mass arrests leading to All-India public protests.			
1943-44: Allied victories in the War leading to intransigent British position.	1943		
1943-44: Gandhiji and Congress leaders released from prison but British refuse to negotiate.			
1943-44: Jinnah adamant on Partition.	1944		
1945: Simla conference fails.	1945		
1946: INA trials.	1946	Meerut	Acharya J.B. Kripalani
1946: Naval mutiny.			
1946: Cabinet Mission to decide fate of India.			
1946: Congress wins an overwhelming majority in elections to the Constitutional Assembly.			
1946: Muslim League decides to withdraw and press for the creation of Pakistan, 16 August chosen as direct action day.			
1946: Violence in Bengal – 6000 killed.			

1946: Congress and Muslim League join interim government.

1946: Jinnah still adamant.

1947: Partition and Independence.

1947

### After Freedom

• Communal frenzy • 30 January 1948 – Martyrdom of Mahatma Gandhi • Integration of the princely states • Creation of the Republic • First general elections • The establishment of real democracy • The Congress message enunciated by Jawaharlal Nehru – ‘Political freedom having been attained through non-violent action under the leadership of Gandhi, the National Congress now has to labour for the attainment of social and economic freedom so that progress and equal opportunity may come to all the people of India without any distinction of race or religion.’

30 January 1948: Mahatma Gandhi assassinated.

1948	Jaipur	Pattabhi Sitaramayya
1950	Nasik	Purshottam Das Tandon
1951	New Delhi	Jawaharlal Nehru
1953	Hyderabad	Jawaharlal Nehru
1954	Kalyani	Jawaharlal Nehru

### Towards Socialism

1955: Resolution seeking to introduce planning for a socialistic pattern of society.

1955: Concept of economic and social reconstruction.

1955	Avadi	U.N. Dhebar
1956	Amritsar	U.N. Dhebar
1957	Indore	U.N. Dhebar
1959	Nagpur	U.N. Dhebar
1960	Bangalore	Neelam Sanjeeva Reddy
1961	Bhavnagar	Neelam Sanjeeva Reddy
1962	Patna	Neelam Sanjeeva Reddy
1964	Bhubaneshwar	K. Kamaraj

1964: Demise of Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru.

### The Advent of Indira Gandhi

1965: Demise of Prime Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri.

1965: Indira Gandhi chosen as prime minister.

1965	Durgapur	K. Kamaraj
1966	Jaipur	K. Kamaraj
1968	Hyderabad	S. Nijalingappa
1969	Faridabad	S. Nijalingappa

1969: Bank nationalisation.

1969: Abolition of the Privy purses.

1969: Split in Congress over the election of the President of India.

1969	Bombay	Jagjivan Ram
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1971: Mid-term poll swept by Indira Gandhi.

1972: Congress gets massive victories in state elections.

1975: Imposition of Emergency.

1977: Loss in general elections.

1977: Congress for democracy splits the party.

1978: Split in Congress.

1971		
1972	Calcutta	Shankar Dayal Sharma
1975	Chandigarh	Dev. Kant Borooah
1977		
1978	New Delhi	Indira Gandhi

1978: Indira Gandhi sweeps state elections in Andhra and Karnataka.

1980: Indira Gandhi sweeps back to power with over 300 seats in the Lok Sabha.

1980

1983

Calcutta

Indira Gandhi

1984

31 October 1984: Indira Gandhi assassinated.

### **Towards the Twenty First Century**

• 1984 Rajiv Gandhi leads the Congress to an unprecedented victory winning 401 seats in the Lok Sabha • First steps taken towards changing the political and economic climate in the country • Attempt to solve long pending disputes: \* Mizo Accord \* Assam Accord \* Punjab Accord \* Historic visit to China

1985

Bombay

Rajiv Gandhi

1989: Congress largest single party with 197 seats.

Rajiv Gandhi chooses to sit in opposition because he did not get a clear mandate.

1989

### **Reforming the Economy**

1991: Rajiv Gandhi assassinated while campaigning during Lok Sabha elections.

1991

1991: Congress comes to power after the death of Rajiv Gandhi.

1991: P.V. Narasimha Rao chosen as prime minister

1991: Manmohan Singh as finance minister takes first steps towards opening up the economy and making it globally competitive.

1992

Tirupati

P.V. Narasimha Rao

1996

1996: Congress loses general elections.

1996: P.V. Narasimha Rao resigns from presidency of party.

1997

Calcutta

Sitaram Kesri

### **The Road to Recovery**

14 March 1998: Sonia Gandhi takes over as Congress President.

1998

1998: Congress wins state election and forms governments in Mahdya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Delhi.

1999: Congress wins state elections and forms governments in Goa, Maharashtra and Arunachal Pradesh.

1999

2000: Congress wins state elections and forms governments in Assam, Kerala and Pondicherry.

2000

2001: Congress wins state elections and forms governments in Punjab, Uttaranchal and J&K.

2001

Bangalore

Sonia Gandhi

2003: Congress wins state elections and forms governments in Himachal Pradesh and Meghalaya.

2003

## Books

**THE VIOLENCE OF DEVELOPMENT: The Politics of Identity, Gender and Social Inequalities in India** edited by Karin Kapadia. Kali for Women, New Delhi, 2002.

THIS edited volume of essays critically examines the 'contemporary situation of women in India' and locates the inquiry at the intersection of the 'cultural, social, political, and economic domains.' The essays, originally conceived as individual research papers, were commissioned by the Policy Research Review and the Innovation Section of the Gender Board of the World Bank in 1999. They have benefited in coming together in a single volume for a wider audience—specialist and layperson alike.

The overview posits a few overlapping themes that weave together the collection, namely the structural violence implicit in the development enterprise and how it is experienced by women at particular intersections of caste, class, gender and community identity. It expresses a growing dissatisfaction with the 'mainstreamed' macro-indicators of women's empowerment, those relating to access to education, paid employment and fertility decline. Despite the advertised gains for women, Kapadia states that a closer

look reveals a contrary picture, what she describes as the 'current paradox of the steady socio-cultural devaluation of women in a context of economic growth.'

A related theme guiding the essays is thus the tension between the principle of formal equality and its implementation within the context of deeply embedded social inequalities as evident in Indian society. Hence, the overview suggests an expanded understanding of 'violence', going beyond overt forms of coercion to include and engender the everyday kinds of violence that are produced by interlinked structures of domination and subordination and which subvert people's chances of survival. Yet another concern is the urgency to articulate an alternative feminist politics that can make sense of and reflect upon women's position/experiences in a society riven by the larger politics of caste, class, gender, community and region without being held hostage to the same. Instances of women's mobilisation against sectarian violence, in claiming political identities for collective empowerment, and building partnerships across struggles—all constitute the proverbial silver lining and provide hope for the future.

The individual authors adopt a wide range of analytical viewpoints and topical foci to document and explore the persistent and the growing inequality

between men and women across social groups. The methodology too is eclectic, some authors basing their study on secondary data while others on primary research, using an effective combination of quantitative and qualitative research tools to explore the relevant issues at multiple levels – nation, state, or region. The first set of essays explore the persistence of deteriorating sex ratios and dowry practice and more significantly its recent emergence as a pan Indian and caste phenomena (as opposed to being specific to the northern states and an upper caste practice). According to Banerjee, the gap between the social endowments of women and the needs of the new economy continues to define women's beleaguered position in the labour market, engendering a context where violence against women is normalised and accepted as part of the status quo.

Similarly, Swaminathan explores the empty promise of 'gender-blind development' from the standpoint of scheduled caste women in Tamil Nadu, a state that ranks among the top few in terms of conventional economic, social and demographic indicators. She documents the growing marginalisation of dalit women and the increasing dependence of households, especially children and the elderly, on their labour for survival, arguing that it is 'distress' (as opposed to the touted 'agency' and 'autonomy') that underlies women's work participation rates in the informal sector and the much documented fertility decline of the state.

Kapadia interrogates the relationship between gender, caste, and class in Tamil Nadu through the analytical lens of an emergent modernity, which she claims is both complex and paradoxical. According to her, class-based status is steadily emerging as the 'central diacritic of translocal modernity' within the contemporary context of India's globalizing economy and has important implications for gender and caste relations in India, particularly in the southern states. Her essay explores the emerging role of dowry in transforming inter/intra-caste relations as an important marker of social and class mobility, and as a signifier of increasing discrimination against women in a society that has traditionally favoured isogamous marriages, bride price, and more egalitarian norms of conduct between men and women.

The second set of essays address the issue of gender and violence in its specificity as well as the growing sectarian violence that has accompanied the rise of right wing politics in India. Sharma, focusing on slum women in Bombay and their responses to the communal rioting of 1992-93, avoids a reductive class-based analysis in defining women's engagement with sectarian clashes – all poor women oppose communal

violence. She views women's responses as a function of the 'social cohesion' that had developed in the various locations, more often than not a direct consequence of long term organising by women and the poor on various locally relevant issues.

Butalia's essay provides an analytical review of the women's movement and its shifting terms of engagement with the issue of violence, the state, and the accompanying demystification of the category of 'Indian woman'. She writes that the rise of communal politics and right wing nationalism has challenged the consensus of 'sisterhood' and the category of women as perennial 'victims', and further brought to fore the contested nature of gender, nationalism and the state. According to Butalia, there is a particular urgency to address the latter and using the example of Kashmir, indicates that it is the ambivalence of nationalism that often deters activists from actively interrogating the issue of Kashmir and the violence faced by Kashmiri women.

Srivastava's essay on the macro and micro realities of violence against rural women in Uttar Pradesh provides an empirical exploration of domestic violence, the neglect of Muslim women by the women's movement in the state (despite the considerable numbers), the particularly degrading aspects of violence lived by dalit women, and the complicity of the state – either as the perpetrators or as conspirators. She emphasises the imbrication of caste, class, and community identity in framing women's experiences of violence and, unlike other contributors, is not too optimistic about the possibilities of forging a consensus among women that can always rise above the stranglehold exercised by divisive identity politics.

The subsequent essays focus on political representation of women, a sphere that seems to have been the most impermeable to the articulation of gender concerns until the recent passage of the 73rd and 74th amendments granting women 'reserved seats' in rural and urban local governments. Narayanan argues that the legislation is necessary but not sufficient to ensure women's effective participation in local governance. She documents and analyses the enabling role played by the state sponsored Mahila Samakhya (MS) in Karnataka in the last decade via its multiple strategies – of unleashing a holistic process of women's collective empowerment in general, empowering elected women representatives (EWR), strengthening the wider political roles of (dalit) sangha women as citizens, and forging linkages at different levels with the panchayati raj institutions (PRIs). The essay, at one level a celebration of women's activism and mobilisation, is also a reflective analysis of the



competing nature of women's practical and strategic interests as well as the conflicting and overlapping identities of dalit women in evolving new gendered subjectivities of women.

Niranjana and Mayaram's articles on women and PRIs, in Andhra Pradesh and Rajasthan respectively, provide a stark contrast to the positive energy of the Karnataka experience. The absence of any catalysing organisation in the case of Andhra Pradesh and the inability of the state sponsored Women's Development Programme (WDP) in Rajasthan to build upon its earlier achievements has meant that the impact of the amendments has rarely been substantive. Women, especially dalit women who have attempted to venture out in the political arena have met with intense masculine and upper caste resistance, often marked by violence, although, Mayaram insistently and rightly interjects that one cannot uncritically favour an automatic correspondence between being a 'woman' and engaging in 'politics of honesty and integrity'.

Anandhi's study on Tamil Nadu adopts the analytic of 'public and private patriarchy' to highlight the various social tensions that constrain the promise implicit in the PRIs for women. These include women's economic dependency and patriarchal control within the family structures, which often reduce women to de jure positions of leadership. When women do occupy positions of leadership, their effectiveness is further curtailed by restrictions imposed on their mobility as well as their own internalised notions of respectability; or by non-cooperation by the upper caste male members of the panchayat and the local bureaucracy, the latter being most severe for dalit women. Anandhi's interrogation of the 'patriarchal' nature of the state and bureaucracy also raises important questions regarding the limitations and possibilities of state-sponsored interventions, like the MS programme documented by Narayanan, in enabling a social transformation.

Samita Sen's concluding essay revisits the Indian women's movement to interrogate the historical imperatives that frame it with a view to move beyond the current impasse. Sen opines that 'currently the woman's movement is deeply cleaved, and especially so over the issues of the Uniform Civil Code and the move to reserve seats for women in Parliament.' Sen's provocative account too isolates the contested relationship between women, state, and nationalism and transformation of women as objects as well as subjects of state policies as the defining theme to understand the movement's priorities, its solidarity, and its schisms. While acknowledging the multiple identities of women and the impos-

sibility of talking about 'a' women's movement, Sen also asserts that the promise of the 'possibility of secular political collectives to which women can belong, not by ascription, but by voluntary participation' is the only way forward beyond the current impasse.

The link between economic development and status of women may have been reduced to an aphorism in the field of international development. However, this volume tells us that the precise nature of relationship still remains open for theoretical and empirical interrogation. Avoiding accounts of unmitigated gloom as well as a naïve belief in the linear progression towards gender equality, this volume has undoubtedly contributed to the debate by putting forth a nuanced analysis of the seeming intractability of gender inequality in India amidst market driven economic growth. Overall the individual essays are well researched and analytically written and as such provide a valuable addition to our knowledge base of the 'contemporary situation of women in India.'

The strength of the volume lies in its ability to mesh its diverse theoretical concerns with rich empirical data from all across India, with special emphasis on Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, and Karnataka. Given the immense and varied sweep of the different essays, Kapadia's overview is laudable in its ability to weave together the diversity of empirical data to put forth a cohesive argument. However, it stops short of addressing the thematic (dis)engagements between the different theoretical/analytical frameworks adopted by the individual authors, leaving the reader with a pastiche of frameworks to make sense of. Nevertheless, the volume is an important contribution to the women and development literature and policy-makers, development planners and practitioners, bureaucrats, academic researchers and activists alike will do well to heed to the questions raised and insights on offer here.

**Aarti Saihjee**

**STATE POLITICS AND PANCHAYATS IN INDIA** by Buddhadeb Ghosh and Girish Kumar. Manohar and Centre de Sciences Humaines, New Delhi, 2003.

THE growing literature on panchayats in India largely contains descriptive narrations some of which happen to be repetitive. But this book breaks new ground. It is a pioneering attempt to analyse causes of why constitutionally mandated panchayats succeeded in some

states and failed in others. The degree of success is not the same, even in states where it thrived. There is no attempt, however, to present a simplistic unilinear sequence of causality. The authors through diligent study, assiduous research and commendable analytical skill try to unravel the mystery of power sharing or power cornering by various segments of society in different states subsequent to the 73rd and 74th constitution amendments which ordained a 'third stratum' of governance below the state.

What is remarkable about the book is the rigid conceptual framework under which the study was conducted. The authors sought to answer the question 'Why what happened did actually happen in that manner' (p. 14). It is an audacious task because in doing so the authors had to tell the truth, often the unpalatable truth, which they have done with scholastic objectivity and surgical incisiveness. The reasons for Y.B. Chavan's prompt acceptance of Balwantraj Mehta's recommendations in 1960 in Maharashtra were quite different from Jyoti Basu's urge to constitute three-tier panchayats in West Bengal in 1978. Both were astute political persons trying to establish an institutional structure below the state which would support and sustain them in power for a long time. While Chavan wanted to create 'opportunity structures' to accommodate the 'political aspirations of the rising rural elites belonging to the dominant caste cluster of Maratha-Kunbi' (p. 18), Jyoti Basu, theoretically a staunch believer in (democratic) centralism, promptly created in 1978 a three-tier panchayat system to dig roots in the rural areas of West Bengal where the left parties' hold was initially tenuous and to diffuse state power among numerous panchayat bodies to checkmate any central move to dislodge the Left Front from power. Though both of them ushered in a strong panchayat system in two different time frames, their motivation, reasoning and circumstances were quite distinct and dissimilar.

Jawaharlal Nehru was a great protagonist of panchayati raj. Yet a Congress government in Bihar consistently refused to implement the recommendations of the Balwantraj Mehta committee during Nehru's life time and later on did nothing to implement either the Asoka Mehta committee recommendations or even the constitutional mandate of establishing panchayats till the other day. Bihar continues to wallow, with supreme unconcern, in the murky quagmire of casteism, clannism and localism, irrespective of what happens in the rest of the country.

The book contains a scintillating introduction presenting in summary form the findings of the four

case studies of Maharashtra, Gujarat, West Bengal and Bihar, which form the other four chapters and a concluding chapter. It has a good bibliography that would be helpful to any student of panchayats for further follow up study.

I have no intention of summarising the findings of the book. That would deny the reader the taste of the delectable and rich fare that awaits him. I would like to make a couple of points about the general methodology adopted by the authors in analysing factors favouring or disavouring panchayats in a particular state. In the three case studies relating to Maharashtra, Gujarat and Bihar the authors depended heavily on the classical Indian sociological mode of explaining basic socio-political variables through caste-clan factors. In a stage of social and political regression that the country is passing through currently, harking us backward towards fundamentalism, caste undoubtedly is becoming a significant issue. But in this process one cannot ignore the class phenomenon altogether. There are large areas of caste-class overlap, where one can, perhaps, use one for the other.

But ascendancy of a particular class and its attempt to monopolise power at different tiers of governance to the exclusion of others to maximize class gain cannot be overlooked. The Maratha-Kunbi cluster in Maharashtra or the rich Patidar farmers in Gujarat, indicate that an economically dominant class would endeavour and succeed in capturing power both in panchayats and the state. In some places they would do so by sharing and in other cases by cornering, as in the case of Bihar. In West Bengal the urban petty bourgeoisie, which formed the backbone of the Left Front, wanted an alliance with the middle and upper peasantry in rural areas to remain in power. The panchayat was the political and institutional tool to forge this alliance. And this coalition proved so successful that the Left Front could win six successive general elections.

The case studies provide tales of labyrinthine complexity and maze of caste-clan-*biradari* issues which have been shaping and directing politics of several states for the last five decades. It is a serious discourse on the evolution of the Indian state, which is still in its formative stage. It is empirical and rational and embodies the best traditions of social science. Both absorbing and sometimes provocative, it is a must read for all who care about the fate and future of panchayats in India.

**D. Bandyopadhyay**

## **PRISONERS OF THE NUCLEAR DREAM** edited

by M.V. Ramana and C. Rammanohar Reddy. Orient Longman, Hyderabad, 2003.

*Prisoners of the Nuclear Dream* edited by M.V. Ramana and C. Rammanohar Reddy is perhaps the most comprehensive and persuasive work to have emerged in recent times on the nuclearisation of South Asia, following the Pokharan and Chagai tests of 1998.

An explicit critique of nuclear weapons and its logical corollary, the programme of nuclearisation adopted by India as also Pakistan, this book lays bare the claims by the powers that be that nuclear weapons and the process of weaponisation provide 'security and stability'. Rather, the nuclear tests of 1998 have had the effect of increasing manifold the insecurities plaguing the nation, as exemplified by the incursions of 1999 in Kargil.

The most remarkable aspect of this book, which is divided into four sections, lies in its selection of essays by eminent scholars, academicians and scientists who examine the impact of this process of nuclearisation and thereby challenge the ongoing attempt by the state to create a consensus about the quest and irrational objectives associated with nuclear weapons.

In the first section titled Issues of Strategy and Foreign Relations, Kanti Bajpai argues that India's decision to pursue nuclear weapons as a consequence of China's decision to go nuclear was misguided as it led to the emergence of a nuclear Pakistan, further reinforcing India's decision to intensify its nuclear programme. By clearly evaluating the Pakistan-China relationship, Bajpai highlights the need for a common strategy with Pakistan in arriving at a decision to do away with nuclear weapons. Shocking as it may seem, neither India nor Pakistan had, at the time of testing their nuclear weapons, an effective command and control mechanism, an issue examined by Admiral Ramdas. His essay evaluates and highlights the need for a national security planning mechanism and brings out the inadequacies of the draft Indian nuclear doctrine. In his essay on managing nuclear weapons in South Asia, Ejaz Haider calls for the linking of Pakistan's offer of a 'no war pact' with India's offer of a 'no first use'. The essay by Ye Zhengjia, while elaborating on China's reaction to the India tests, also highlights the quick rapprochement that followed, with high profile visits by dignitaries which have more or less restored the parity in relations, although a lot remains to be done.

In the second section titled Issues of Science and Ethics, Zia Mian details the workings of a command and control system were it to be in place given the experiences of countries with nuclear weapons who are none the wiser despite decades of handling weapons and the procedures to manage them. He examines the role of delivery platforms and the available hardware with India and Pakistan (an expensive venture), and the callousness involved in the subcontinental version of an arms race despite having perhaps some of the worst social indicators of human development. The wisdom of possessing nuclear weapons and the rationale behind their deployment has always been a 'grey area' as it flouts all possible norms and ethics that civilized societies take pride in.

Amartya Sen addresses the ethical and moral questions associated with nukes, highlighting the immorality of designing and manufacturing such weapons that, whether used or not, have the potential of killing hundreds of thousands. Amulya Reddy, in interpreting the harnessing of science and technology to develop weapons of mass destruction, critically evaluates the role of the scientific establishment that, for all practical purposes, appears as the most hawkish amongst all segments of the decision-making class. M.V. Ramana details the mobilizing of the elite by the scientific establishment and the creation of lobbies powerful enough to shape a nuclear and missile policy. Siddharth Mallavarapu interprets the advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice that in 1996 ruled that the 'threat or use of nuclear weapons would generally be contrary to the rules of international law...' and analyses the implications of the ruling as also the various aspects that precede the ruling.

In the third section, Issues of Militarisation, Politics and Economics of Nuclear Weapons, the dangers of a nationalism gone berserk are brought out in two finely argued essays by Krishna Ananth and Srirupa Roy. While Srirupa Roy bases her argument on the emergence of a post-colonial state that emphasizes nation building through monumental projects such as the acquiring of a 'nuclear status', Krishna Ananth traces the decision to go nuclear to the rhetoric of the Sangh Parivar that has consistently called for nuclearisation under the catch phrase of 'constructing Indian nationalism'. While the true costs of the nuclearisation programme initiated by the Indian state may never be known, Rammanohar Reddy breaks down the financial costs of India going nuclear and estimates that it would cost around Rs 80,000 crore over a decade – all of it to the detriment of social spending that would otherwise

have benefited large sections of the society. Jean Dreze too establishes the links between growing militarism and the decline in social indicators. The process of nuclearisation pauperises and constricts future growth by curtailing schemes and programmes that otherwise would have been diverted towards welfare.

In the last section, Issues of Environment and Health, the consequences of a nuclear programme initiated by an irresponsible state and the impact it has on the lives of the people is succinctly brought out by Surendra Gadekar and M.V. Ramana. The last essay of the book by Thomas George details the horrific after-effects of a nuclear explosion and the levels of radiation on human beings.

As a tract that powerfully challenges India's decision to go nuclear, *Prisoners of the Nuclear Dream* is a highly recommended book richly deserving the attention of students, academicians and the powers that be, who in their infinite wisdom have thrust our country into a race where there are no winners, only sinners!

**Raviprasad Narayanan**

#### **PARTIES AND PARTY POLITICS IN INDIA**

edited by Zoya Hasan. Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2002.

At the time of decolonisation and even during the early years of independence, questions were raised by India experts, mostly westerners, about the future of democracy in India, seen as lacking the basic ingredients responsible for the success of democracy as per western liberal thinking. Low levels of literacy, lack of industrialization, the presence of enormous ethnic-cultural diversities, an absence of democratic experience were all considered detrimental for the Nehruvian agenda of democracy building. After more than half a century, however, students of Indian politics tend to agree that barring the brief interlude of the Emergency, Indian democracy has not only survived but has done better, particularly when compared to other post-colonial 'new' democracies.

In her introduction, Zoya Hasan refers to the broadening and deepening of the representative character of democracy, albeit in its procedural form, as a signifier of the success of Indian democracy. She draws attention to a significant change taking place in the terrain of democratic politics that is embedded in the process of social change. The democratic upsurge is evidenced in the form of change in the size, composition and the self-definition of the voters 'with new

social groups entering the ambit of the political system.' Moreover, the electorate seems to have much broader choices with the emergence of the new political parties.

On the flip side, however, there are disquieting signs like the endemic multiplication in the number of political parties leading to a fractionalized political space, the rise of regional parties and caste/community-based parties that threaten to unleash sectarian politics of obscurantism, and an overall decline in terms of ideology, organization and political morality. One also increasingly witnesses maladies like corrupt politics, lack of performance, disorder and instability being perpetrated by the parties in a 'transforming India'. 'In short, political parties wilfully pursue their own narrow political interests at the expense of the greater common good.'

However, can we imagine the success of post-colonial Indian democracy, even in its procedural if not substantive form, in the absence of political parties' organization and mobilization? The answer is a resounding no. It is no surprise that an understanding of the distinctive features of the party system go a long way in comprehending the complexity of the Indian polity.

The book makes an attempt to capture the evolving nature of the party system in India by incorporating some seminal essays written over the last three crucial decades by noted theorists of Indian politics. The book is theme-wise divided into five sections. The first takes up 'the dominance and decline of the Congress' comprising the articles by Rajni Kothari, Pradeep K. Chibber and John R. Petrocick, and Anthony Heath and Yogendra Yadav. Writing about the Congress that dominated Indian politics in the first four decades of independence, they provide useful insights about its ideology, strategy and nature of the social base. Kothari, in his now celebrated essay on the 'Congress system' essentially profiles 'an Indian model of democratization' under a unique 'one party dominance system'. He argues that the Congress system representing a social coalition, ideological centrist politics and a political culture based on pluralism, tolerance, bargaining and accommodation provided, among other things, 'a comprehensive mechanism of change... a system of conflict articulation and resolution... and a system of communications between society and politics.' Chibber and Petrocick present an alternative picture by arguing that the 'decentralization of the party system and the Congress' support base was state-specific and determined by distinct social constellations in the regions.'

Kochanek analyses the institutional changes introduced by Indira Gandhi to create a centralized 'new Congress'. Giving a detailed account of the measures taken by Indira Gandhi between 1967 to 1976, he refers to her personalized politics of nomination in the party institutions and her efforts to ensure further centralization of the federal polity, subordination of the President as well as cabinet to the prime minister contributing to the collapse of power bases in the states. Based on the National Election Survey data of the 1990s conducted by Lokniti/CSDS, Heath and Yadav argue that there has been a distinct shift in the social base of the Congress in the aftermath of the rise of parties such as BJP and BSP. The Congress from being a 'catch all' party commanding the support of a rainbow social coalition, has been 'reduced to merely picking up the residual constituencies which other parties had not mobilized.'

That the second section of the book which revolves around the 'rise and growth of Hindu nationalist politics' begins with B.D. Graham's paper on the historical growth of Hindu nationalism comes as no surprise as it has been at the centre of major transformation in the party system. While Graham presents an overview of the evolving nature of the organization and leadership of the Jan Sangh in the '50s and '60s, Christophe Jaffrelot analyses the nature of the development of a solid network of cadres supplemented by a strategy of 'ethno-mobilization' to produce a mass following for the BJP. Oliver Heath covers the journey of the BJP from being a localized party with a restricted political presence into a major party with a mass base in post-mandir India. More significantly, he analyses the effect of its expansion on its traditional social base. In a similar vein, the rise and growth of Shiv Sena – a metropolitan based turned regional party, representing ultra-rightist Hindutva – receives attention in an article jointly written by Mary Katzenstein, Uday Mehta and Usha Thakkar.

'Radical politics and left parties' forms the third section of the book. Javeed Alam, while taking an historical look at the formative phase of the Communist Party, asks why 'a sense of being besieged, together with rearguard actions, predominates the politics of the left today.' He attributes it to the 'fad' of the communist parties with 'the position of the bourgeoisie and its characterization' that 'did not allow them to intervene in the day to day manoeuvres of the Indian state to subsume society within itself.' Amrita Basu's essay records the evolution of parliamentary communism in West Bengal with reference to the larger

debates about communist strategies in a democratic system.

The interlinkage between 'social diversity and party politics' constitute the core theme of the fourth section that includes the essays by Jyotirindra Das Gupta, Zoya Hasan and Narendra Subramanian. Das Gupta analyses the 'reorganization and redirection' in Indian party politics that took place during the post-Emergency Janata phase. His paper enables us to understand the significance of the issues of ethnicity and other axes of social cleavage that have increasingly played a significant role in the transformation of party politics. Zoya Hasan attempts to understand the 'new lower caste politics' with special reference to UP, as 'new' parties like the BSP take recourse to caste driven political mobilization to alter the power structure. Subramanian's paper refers to the strategy and the ethnic populist politics of the Dravidian parties from the DK to DMK and ADMK. Based on his study of the course of the Dravidian parties' movement, the author argues that organizational pluralism can impel ethnic and populist forces towards promoting stability, the social pluralism resulting into an increased level of representation of emergent groups within a democratic system.

The fifth and the final section discusses issues of political competition and transformation of the party system. James Manor presents a saga of the decline of Congress and its impact over the nature of party systems in India while covering the period from Nehruvian India to the Rajiv era. Sridharan expresses his concern about shrinking democratic space due to an increased fractionalization of party politics. The relationship between India's parliamentary federalism, the party system, and coalition politics in the aftermath of the federalization of the Indian politics is well analyzed by Balveer Arora.

Thinking of transformation in the nature of party politics in a comparative mode one finds that the West has been witness to 'a crisis of party politics' in terms of both party membership and partisanship, reflected in partisan dealignment. There is also evidence of what has been called 'antipolitics', the rise of new political movements as well as organizations showing marked antipathy towards conventional centres of power and opposition to established parties of government. The unprecedented rise in the 'new' social movements confirms the same phenomenon.

A reading of these papers, however, makes it abundantly clear that notwithstanding the 'inadequacies' of political parties in responding to the aspirations

of the electorate celebrating the 'second democratic upsurge' or 'the erosion of institutional edifice of democracy', political parties in India continue to play a significant role in averting the pitfalls of 'non-party, plebiscitary democracy, and strong executive leadership grounded in populism' that has been the bane of 'new' democracies and is now increasingly evidenced even in, as current happenings reveal, the 'lead nation', the USA.

Ashutosh Kumar

**VISHWA HINDU PARISHAD AND INDIAN POLITICS** by Manjari Katju. Orient Longman, Hyderabad, 2003.

ANY perception that Indians, or at least the Hindu communities, might have of themselves as a peaceful, non-violent, tolerant and accommodating people today stands discredited. In no small measure this is due to the diatribes we are daily subjected to by the likes of a Pravin Togadia or Acharya Dharmendra. Ever since the mobilisations around the Ram janmabhoomi—the rath yatra, demolition of the Babri Masjid, the riots that followed, and more recently Gujarat—it is 'leaders' like the above who have come to occupy centre-stage in Hindu public consciousness.

It was not always so. The Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), which together with the Bajrang Dal so defines the militant face of Hinduism, started off on a different note. Few today remember that the initial constitution of the VHP, way back in the mid '60s, involved venerable figures like Swami Chinmayananda, K.M. Munshi, even the evergreen Vedantist (and now Congress MP) Karan Singh. And though its organizational beginnings can be traced to a strategic decision by the RSS, in particular its then *sarsanghchalak*, Guru Golwalkar, some care was taken to demarcate the broad agenda of Hindu social reform and resurgence from what is now recognised as political Hindutva.

True that even in those early years, Hindu leaders (and possibly communities) were imbued with an unease about the decline of Hindu values and culture. The fallouts of both Partition and the Nehruvian policies of secularism were seen as inimical to a resurgence of Hinduism. Conversions, particularly in the sensitive North East, aroused apprehension, more so because of the decision to carve out a separate state of Nagaland. Equally, Hindu opinion was hostile to the idea of a Sikh dominated Punjab. Nevertheless, the early conclaves of the VHP clearly set themselves a cultural, not

political agenda. Above all, the gathering was keen to project an identity distinct from the RSS, not surprising given the odium attached to the organisation after the assassination of the Mahatma.

Sceptics might today argue that all this was a mere sham, that the current VHP is only a logical extension of its beginnings and that all its favourite hobby-horses can be traced back. Possibly, but then possibly not. Not all preoccupations with matters of faith and religious identity turn communal. That is a matter of political engagement. One could as easily argue that the unmindful neglect of such concerns, if not derision towards matters of faith (in particular Hindu), left the field wide open for different practitioners to forward restrictive and revanchist formulations as community objectives. If so, a virulent VHP is as much a reflection of the weakness of secular politics as it is of the drive and persistence of actors whose politics we decry.

Manjari Katju's narrative, an outgrowth of her doctoral dissertation, marks an important beginning in an otherwise relatively unexplored terrain. Barring Eva Hellman's Upsalla University dissertation, and H.K. Vyas' 1983 mimeo for the CPI, it possibly is the first book length study of an organisation that so impinges on our political consciousness. If only for this reason, it deserves to be widely read.

There are, of course, other reasons. Manjari's grandfather, Shiv Nath Katju, was an early member and subsequently president of the VHP in the late '80s. This no doubt aided her access to a wide range of activists and office-bearers of the organisation whose views helped develop a more coherent and nuanced understanding of the VHP's ideology, in particular its transformation from a loose federation of Hindu reformers and religious leaders to a fighting arm of militant Hindutva closely aligned with both the RSS and the BJP. It also helps us understand how distinctly unspiritual leaders like Togadia acquired prominence.

Not surprisingly, much of Manjari Katju's narrative centres around the Ram janmabhoomi controversy, how the earlier spark lit by the Meenakshipuram conversions were flamed by the agitation over the Ayodhya temple/mosque. Clearly, far more than the earlier mobilisations around the banning of cow slaughter, or even countering conversions of dalits and tribals to Christianity or Islam, it is the Ram agitation that both brought 'saints' into politics and gave a militant and exclusivist edge to Hindu nationalism.



The interesting division of labour between the VHP, Bajrang Dal and the different mahila groupings under the overall guidance of the RSS and the BJP presents a fascinating (and frightening) example of how issues and non-issues can be welded together both for securing political power and setting social agendas. Equally interesting is the attempt to bring together myriad Hindu sects and panths and other Indic religionists (Jains, Buddhists, Sikhs) into a common fold against the designated 'others' – followers of Islam and Christianity. Above all, as Manjari argues, a 'successful' targeting of the 'other' helps paper over internal divisions and divert attention from sorely needed social reform.

Ironically, it is this externalising of energies that may well spell the death knell of the VHP/RSS project. The effort to incorporate dalits and lower OBCs is facing strong resistance from the Bahujan Samaj Party. Despite trying to accommodate Ambedkar as an icon, the movement has not tasted much success. Its strategy might work better in the central tribal belts because the adivasis have faced both social and economic neglect for long. But even here, the VHP has been forced to adopt the strategy of its bete noire, the Church, in opening schools and hospitals to attract the tribals. And engaging in violence against Church functionaries is already proving counter-productive. Also, the VHP has no effective argument against the charge that the organisation is itself engaging in reconversion (*shuddhi*) despite targeting the Church for doing the same.

Where this book is not very helpful is in understanding the future of the VHP and its brand of religious politics. In some measure, attention has already shifted away from the Ram temple. Equally, the VHP's anti-Church programme has only earned it odium. Of course, targeting Muslims, Pakistan and terrorism has an ever available audience. But given the VHP's dependance on the BJP for providing a congenial atmosphere, and the BJPs need to not be overly identified with divisive and hate politics, there is no necessary stability in this course.

Another avenue, somewhat inadequately explored, relates to the VHP's overseas activities. Many analysts have argued that the quantum leap in the VHP mobilisation and visibility owes disproportionately to its funding by overseas Hindus, particularly in the West. However, even here events like Gujarat do not generate sympathy. Overplaying radical Hindu nationalism with its decisive edge against Islam and Christianity is unlikely to be tolerated for

too long. Possibly, if the VHP wants to consolidate its overseas clientele, it may need to revisit the earlier Chinmayananda strategy, of keeping Indian (Hindu) culture and roots alive in the expatriate communities. Soft cultural belonging goes further than militant nationalism.

But above all, what this book lacks is political-sociological information on membership, funding sources as also the corporate management strategy needed to keep the enterprise alive. A focus on the ideological and ideational parameters, though helpful, can only be a starting point of investigation into this mobilisational venture.

Harsh Sethi

**DALIT ASSERTION AND THE UNFINISHED DEMOCRATIC REVOLUTION: The Bahujan Samaj Party in Uttar Pradesh** by Sudha Pai. Sage Publications, New Delhi, 2002.

**INDIA'S SILENT REVOLUTION: The Rise of the Low Castes in North Indian Politics** by Christophe Jaffrelot. Permanent Black, New Delhi, 2003.

NOT too long back, a study of Indian politics meant examining the Indian National Congress, not surprising since for the first two decades after independence the two were seen to be co-terminous. Of course there were a few whose excitements lay with the Communist Party, but even they admitted, albeit reluctantly, that the main current belonged to the Congress.

The picture of the 'Congress system', a term popularized by Rajni Kothari, started displaying fractures almost as the term came into popular usage. Processes which became apparent after the death of Nehru – the rise of intermediate caste/peasant parties, the steady consolidation of regional forces – may have taken a few years to unravel. But combined with the loss of élan in the Congress and its steady organizational centralism, the crises became recurrent. And, in the previous decade, with the politics of Mandal and Mandir occupying centrestage, it was soon apparent that the heyday of Congress, or even one party dominance, was behind us.

Thus, what we have seen in recent years is an increasing interest in either the politics of religious symbolism and identity epitomized by the Sangh Parivar and its offshoots (communalism) or the politics of social justice (*izzat*, equality, retributory justice)

exemplified best in the assertion of the 'backward classes'. Both these tendencies and formations have, however, to contend with an increasingly aggressive force (that of dalits) best represented by the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP).

The rapidity with which the BSP has stormed into public consciousness, in particular the crucial state of Uttar Pradesh, has surprised analysts. After all, in no region do dalits constitute a substantial bloc, and in any case, they are divided not only socially and ritually, but in terms of party loyalties. Even more, till the mid '80s, they were not perceived as expressing or even having the potential of articulating an independent politics. That myth is now shattered.

Christophe Jaffrelot's dense monograph, close to 500 pages, presents the most systematic data on the rise of the 'low castes' – both the OBCs and dalits in Indian politics. His thesis is structured around a range of propositions, all dependant on the role that caste/jati identity plays in different spheres. Having accepted the centrality of caste stratification he shows how, despite assertions by the lower orders for equality (Jyotiba Phule, Shahu Maharaj and Ambedkar in Maharashtra and the non-Brahmin movement in the states of the South), the Congress as the dominant party through much of the 20th century practiced a conservative politics in which, despite some play for social reform there was active opposition to and disarticulation of any autonomous identity politics of the lower orders.

He is thus extremely critical of Gandhi, his acceptance of *varnashrama dharma* even while completely rejecting untouchability, the emphasis on caste as an occupational division of labour and, above all, his focus on an organicist village within a Hindu frame. The 'defeat' of Ambedkar and the forging of the Poona Pact (1932) is presented as a major defeat for the dalits. Jaffrelot argues that this strain of accommodating dalits, but in a subordinate position, through a skilful manipulation of quotas (reservation) and sanskritisation (encouraging reform while accepting the terms dictated by the upper castes), continued under successive Congress regimes.

A large part of the monograph examines why the assertion of the lower castes was more successful and came earlier in the West and the South rather than the North-Indian Gangetic plains. This he attributes to the successful ethnicisation of caste in the South (not just non Brahmin but a Dravid identity against a specified 'other') which helped forge a larger coalition. In the North, given the social geography of castes (a term used more by Sudha Pai), we faced a situation of both greater

numbers of the upper castes alongside intense, graded stratification in all other social strata. Thus, unlike in the South and the West, it was more difficult to isolate a smaller segment as the enemy. Further, the Gandhian impulse in the Congress contributed both to keeping dalits within the fold and tempering down radical tendencies.

A final part of his thesis deals with the intermeshing of social identity and quota politics, best represented by the socialists, and peasant politics articulated by the intermediate castes. Successful anti-Congress politics has demanded a coalition of these two tendencies and understandings of politics. However, the conflict between the intermediate land owning castes, the upper strata of the OBCs and the dalits, mainly poor and assetless labour, remains sharp. Possibly this is why we see so many splits in the anti-Congress formations – each articulating the interests of its base. And why it becomes so easy to break their coalitions.

Jaffrelot substantiates his thesis by providing hitherto unavailable details on the caste composition of different parties, both their legislative and organizational wings, in different states across time. It thus becomes clear that whatever the rhetoric, in reality most parties kept out both the dalits and the lower OBCs. Places where the BSP now appears to be consolidating, or where OBC politics is determinant, owe a lot to the aggressive politics of quotas by different socialist formations. And both the fragility and volatility of lower caste politics are explained by the relative absence of caste based social movements as in the South.

Jaffrelot, however, remains hopeful about the BSP, including its strain of opportunist politics. Not only has Mayawati managed to become chief minister of UP thrice, her electoral base shows little sign of fragmenting. It is this fact that has forced both the Congress and the BJP to engage in social engineering because the BSP holds the trump cards in the electoral arena of India's largest state. Whether it is Digvijay Singh's 'dalit agenda' in Madhya Pradesh, or the BJP's alliances with the BSP and accommodating Ambedkar in its pantheon of greats, Jaffrelot remains convinced that the battle for social equality has been finally joined in the North, ushering in a silent revolution.

Sudha Pai's monograph does not have the same sweep. Nevertheless, her study of the BSP (its ideology, organisational history, and electoral strategies) helps us understand the specific contours of this social formation. There is much in common between her and



Jaffrelot's analysis of why dalit assertion took longer to express itself in the North. In addition to the social geography of castes and sanskritisation, she highlights the role of the land structure and the growth of an educated and economically independent strata among the dalits as key factors.

The BSP has built upon the earlier work done by the scheduled caste federations, BAMCEF – a union of SC employees, and the DS4 (the first coalitional attempt between dalits, OBCs and minorities). The BSP first started as an election spoiler party – unable to win on its own but capable of ensuring that its opponents lost. Its subsequent opportunistic coalitions, use of state power to aggressively promote a dalit cause (Ambedkar villages, increasing dalit representation in the power structure, directing development funds to dalit villages, loans for dalit enterprise) and playing a politics of identity symbolism is what has got it so far.

Nevertheless, Pai is less enthusiastic about both the democratic and 'social revolution' credentials of the BSP, as her case study of Meerut makes apparent. She argues that the string of opportunistic alliances combined with the centralization of power in the party may stymie any further growth of the organization. She emphasizes the difference between a party/movement in opposition and the use of state power to enhance space and increase the ability of the lower castes in their struggle for equality.

Unpacking and democratising entrenched social structures is a long haul task. One problem, possibly with the BSP and similar political formations of the lower castes, is that they are (understandably) in a hurry. Having tried various avenues for upward mobility (social reform, skill upgradation, use of quotas/reservation in education/jobs/politics, construction of a separate identity through ethnicisation, promotion of dalit icons) the leadership now feels that the capture and differential use of state power alone can enhance their social project. This may well be an error and trap everyone into a backlash conflict.

Any politics which seeks to advance an exclusivist cause by harping on retributory justice can only engender greater hate. This is why the ideologues of the BSP, as also scholars like Christophe Jaffrelot, need to re-examine their appraisal of Gandhi.

Nevertheless, both monographs constitute a valuable addition to our limited knowledge of a new trend in our politics:

**Harsh Sethi**

# Comment

## Altering the state of expectations

AFTER a decade of 5.5% growth, a rising fiscal deficit, falling foreign exchange reserves, mounting external debt and double-digit inflation, the government of Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao and Union Finance Minister Manmohan Singh left the country with half a decade of 7.0% growth, a lower fiscal deficit and external debt, rising forex reserves, a stable rupee and declining rates of inflation. What did the trick? Manmohan Singh altered the state of expectations.

Expectations matter in market economies. In the old world of planning, policy makers tried to shape expectations by intervening directly in economic decision-making at the macro and the firm level. With governments fiscally constrained, with many public sector enterprises becoming bankrupt and/or incapable of making large greenfield investments, policy makers have to rely increasingly on policy signals to shape expectations in the private sector and thereby augment new investment.

In a world where so many policy makers send out such varied signals, market participants invest a considerable amount of their time and energy deciphering policy signals. Few Indian politicians understand this.

If they did, they'd be cleverer shaping expectations about the future. Look at the Chinese!

Investor expectations are shaped by signals other than policy interventions—investment decisions of other investors, consumer choices, political and social developments and so on. In a world where economic growth is driven by investment decisions which in turn are shaped by expectations, forecasting the future is hazardous. At the best of times economic forecasting is an art, an inexact science. In a world marked by turbulence and the ups and downs of business sentiment, it is more so. But forecasts shape expectations. The two together can also shape policies, even as policies shape them in turn. It's a two-way dialectical relationship.

How the Indian economy will do over the next five years is, therefore, as much a function of what is done over this period by government, investors, industry and by consumers, as it is of what they expect each other to do. As a consequence of all these interactions the economy can go up, or down, or just muddle through a middle path.

Think of yourself in 1991. Five years of 5.0% growth, with an artificial blip of 10% growth in 1988-

89. Double-digit inflation. Rising budgetary deficit and a worsening balance of payments situation. The *Economic Survey*, written by chief economic advisor Deepak Nayyar in February 1991 summed up the situation thus:

'The Indian economy is passing through a very difficult stage due to continued pressures on balance of payments, large budget deficits and double digit inflation. These problems have persisted over the past few years. The situation had been aggravated by the Gulf crisis as well as the uncertain domestic political situation during 1990-91. Due to the shortage of foreign exchange, government had to impose certain restrictions on imports of capital goods, raw materials and components to the industry. There were also constraints on transport and other infrastructural facilities due to a shortage of petroleum products during 1990-91. The current economic situation is indeed very difficult.

'Effective measures are needed to correct fiscal imbalances and to contain the balance of payments deficit within manageable limits. The short term correctives have to be viewed in a medium term setting. Credible structural reforms designed to improve the efficiency and productivity of resource use are an inescapable necessity, if the unavoidable fiscal adjustment is not to lead to stagflation but becomes an occasion to impart a new element of dynamism to the growth process. One should not underestimate the enormity of the task. But the people of India have shown more than once in the past that faced with a crisis their response can fully match the requirements of the situation.'

A fair assessment of the situation at the time. The politicians of the day demurred. Elections arrived, the crisis deepened. A new government had no option but to pursue fiscal stabilisation and structural adjustment. To begin with there was stagflation, but a mix of trade liberalisation, currency devaluation and moderated fiscal adjustment helped revive growth and for five years thereafter there was 7.0% growth. It was a forecaster's nightmare.

Consider the current moment. The external profile of the Indian economy is robust. No one worries about a balance of payments crisis and the Gulf War of the day has passed off leaving the prospect of stable and moderate oil prices. More good news for the external sector. The rupee is stable, even appreciating, and foreign exchange reserves are rising. Exports have touched a new mark of \$50 billion and industrial growth is reviving. If the rain gods smile, the year could end with 6.0% growth.

Against this comforting economic background, there is political uncertainty. The prime minister has taken a bold step towards befriending Pakistan once again and if a breakthrough is achieved the environment for economic growth in the region can improve. However, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad is turning on the communal heat and wants to do a Gujarat in the states that go to polls later this year. If Vajpayee's strategy is to tone down the communal rhetoric by securing a détente with Pakistan, the Togadias of the Sangh Parivar want to spill blood. What kind of economic performance India can deliver over the next five years will depend to a considerable extent on which argument wins.

Vajpayee's politics can deliver at least 6.0% growth. Togadia's will bring the word 'crisis' back into our discussions of the economy. The economics of growth cannot be constructed on the politics of divisiveness and a constant reference to the threat to national security, both internal and external. Political concerns about the future shape investors' expectations. Even so, it is possible to suggest that the underlying trend in the Indian economy can deliver an average of 6.0% growth over the next decade. It is a further acceleration to 8.0% and above that requires concerted and strategic policy intervention.

Only six per cent? That kind of crystal gazing is not hazardous. I am willing to bet that even Vajpayee is capable of delivering an average of 6.0% over the next five years, even though he has delivered only an average growth rate of 5.0% over the past five years. That additional one per cent will come from a variety of sources: the turn of the cycle, the fact that the service sector has attained critical mass to be globally competitive in certain areas, the economic take-off in new regions like eastern India and central India, and such like.

There is also the long view of history that I favour. The Indian economy grew at around zero rate of growth between 1900 and 1950; at 3.5% rate of growth between 1950 and 1980; at a 5.5% rate between 1980 and 2000. In 1992-97 it did record an annual average rate of growth of close to 7.0%, but this slipped to 5.0% in 1998-2003. The system has made its corrections and in the next five years it can deliver anywhere between 5.5% and 6.0%. Only a Togadia can stop that. Sensible politics will ensure this baseline scenario. Question is, what will it take to go beyond? If doing nothing can deliver 5.0% growth, and doing something helps rake in 6.0% growth. What does it take to move up to 7.0% and beyond? That is the challenge for the next five years.

As the first step, alter the state of expectations, once again. The Atal Behari Vajpayee government has been a government of security and foreign policy – nuclear tests, terrorism, India-Pakistan, India-United States; India-China. Historic initiatives have been taken on the external front. Timidity has marked the domestic front. Reforms have been there, but have not altered the state of expectations. The government has done a lot on paper, on the ground there isn't enough new investment in place, domestic or foreign. The intent is good, the effort is palpable, but the overall impact on the state of expectations has been marginal.

The first step for any government that wants to step up the rate of growth of the economy is to alter the state of expectations. Why did the rate of growth of the Indian economy slip from an average of 7.0% in the first half of the last decade to an average of 5.0% thereafter. Start with the big picture. The external economic environment deteriorated. First the Asian financial crisis, then the global economic slowdown and finally the spurt in oil prices. To make matters worse, there were the sanctions following Indian's nuclear tests in 1998 and then in 2001 the aftermath of 9/11, especially in this part of the world.

Despite this difficult external environment, India's external profile improved. The current account embarrassingly logged a surplus, the rupee started appreciating and we not only started prepaying external debt but let some donors know that we can do without their aid.

Of course, it can be argued that with an even more hospitable external environment we could have done better and retained the 7.0% record of the early 1990s. But the art of political management lies in beating external constraints. China did that when it defied the global slowdown and kept the engine of growth working in top gear. It not only helped bail some Asian economies out of a crisis, but also helped keep world trade flows up and, in part, contributed to the resurgence of India's export growth!

So the external alibi is a weak one to explain what went wrong the last five years. My bet is on internal gaps. First, inadequate investment, public and private, domestic and foreign. Second, the state of expectations.

In the *ancien regime* expectations could be countered with public money. When markets sagged, the government could step in and boost investment as well as investor sentiment. China did some of that between 2000 and 2003. India tried too. But the fisc was a constraint. The stubbornly low tax revenues to

national income ratio, the dissaving of the public sector and the slow pace of getting public sector projects off the ground meant that public investment could not play the role it was capable of in boosting investment and sentiment.

The fiscal constraint on public investment was only one part of the problem. The other was a combination of an ideological inhibition against public investment in some quarters, and the sheer inability of the government to get projects off the ground in others. If industrial growth has revived this year it is in part because public investment has picked up. So the prognosis for the future presents itself. Part of the mechanism of pushing growth from 5.0% to 7.0% will relate to finding the resources for and getting them into public investment – roads, railways, ports, irrigation, schools and hospitals, the works.

If public investment is so stimulated, private investment will kick in. There is enough empirical research demonstrating this link – that public investment does not 'crowd out' private investment but can in fact help 'crowd in' private investment. The 'crowding-in' aspect of public investment is inadequately explored in recent years, even though the finance ministry's *Economic Survey 2002-03* tells us that it was public investment in infrastructure that helped stimulate growth last year. 'The demand generated by enhanced public investment in physical infrastructure has been a key stimulant behind industrial recovery,' the Survey says, noting the role of the highways programme in particular. This deserves closer scrutiny and the appropriate lessons drawn for an agenda of 7.0% growth in the next half decade. To stimulate public investment the government must raise resources. The fiscal empowerment of the government, at the Centre and in the states, is a necessary precondition to non-inflationary stimulus of growth-augmenting public investment.

While fiscal empowerment and improving the efficiency of government can help step up public investment, in turn stimulating private investment, there is another way in which private investment can be stimulated. This is by altering the state of expectations. The most important macroeconomic lesson that the Indian political class, with rare exceptions, is yet to learn and comprehend is the role of expectations.

Private investment in a market economy characterised by uncertainty and risk is a function of expectations. As long as growth was a function of public investment in a closed economy, expectations played a secondary role. But when most new investment is to

Whatever.

Whenever.

Wherever.

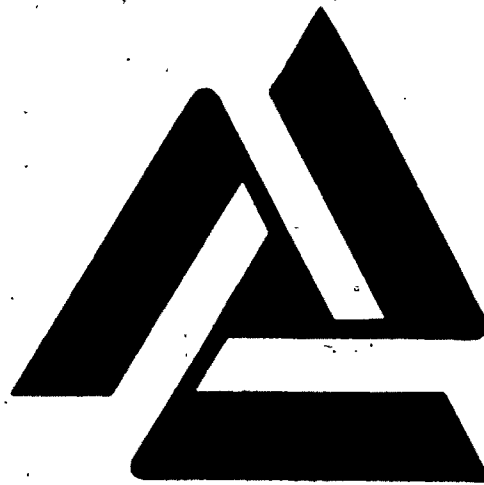
At AFL, we move anything and everything to anywhere.

Now tell us what, when and where.



Where movement is a science

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be undertaken by the private sector expectations shape investment decisions. Few political leaders across the country have understood as yet how their politics shapes investors' expectations. Gujarat's Chief Minister Narendra Modi, for example, is on an investment seeking spree across the country imploring investors to come and invest in his state. Patriotism and love for one's home state apart, what will tempt private investors to bring money in to a state so riven by communal tension?

Terrorism hurt Punjab's investment climate as much in the 1980s and 1990s as gangland wars and communal tension have hurt Maharashtra since. Given a choice between socially stable regions and regions marked by violence and unrest, where would one expect investors to go? Expectations about political and social stability matter. Forecasting investment trends in the next five years does not require clairvoyance to suggest that regions marred by social and political instability and tension are less likely to attract more investment. This argument will also apply at the national level.

In a globalised world with investment opportunities available at home and abroad we can expect investment to flow out of the country to safer regions if investors are unsure about their own homeland. No one was surprised last year when Indian companies began investing in China. It was as much a testimony to the competitiveness and animal spirits of Indian enterprise as it was a vote of a lack of confidence at home. Hence the idea of linking 'peace' with 'prosperity', as suggested by Prime Minister Vajpayee when he made his peace overtures to Pakistan in April 2003, has an economic relevance for the region.

Shaping the positive expectations of hope is the primary political challenge for those in government at the Centre and in the states. The difference between 5.0% growth and 7.0% growth hinges critically on this psychological factor because this kind of acceleration of economic growth cannot happen unless there is a huge increase in new investment. New investment in the private sector will be forthcoming only when investors feel confident about the future. Economists have not yet offered a convincing explanation for the slowdown in economic growth in the period 1998-2003 compared to 1992-1997 from an average of close to 7.0% to an average of around 5.0%. It is possible to suggest that one important reason was the change in the state of expectations owing to greater political uncertainty and social instability. The continued focus of policy attention on terrorism in the

region could well have deterred investors contributing to the decline in gross capital formation in the latter period.

The central economic challenge for India in the next five years is to steeply increase the rate of investment. This requires meeting other related challenges, going beyond the fiscal empowerment of the government required to step up public investment, and the altering of the state of expectations required to step up private investment. These are in the realm of agricultural productivity and rural employment, investment in human capabilities, creating a more competitive and integrated home market and, reducing the transactions cost of doing business.

This is the so-called 'agenda of the states'. There is only that much that the central government can do. Where states are more focused, the results are positive. Where state governments fritter away their mandate, the record is there to see.

Much time need not, therefore, be spent on spelling out new agendas for reform. A 'mission-based' approach like what Rajiv Gandhi adopted in the 1980s with respect to oilseeds and computers can deliver the goods. The Vajpayee government adopted such a 'mission-based' approach to national highways, but more recent news reports suggest that the results are not as impressive as earlier claimed. Without such a focused approach, with deadlines and time limits, it is not possible to step up the average rate of growth by two percentage points.

Increasing rural incomes and generating employment in non-farm activities is critical to expanding the home market for accelerated investment and industrial growth. Investment in infrastructure development in agriculture can come both from the public and private sectors—corporate, cooperative and household. Where such investment is forthcoming it has been possible to register higher rates of income growth.

There will be very little foreign direct investment in the rural sector. However, foreign investment can play an important, if not significant, role in stepping up the rate of investment in the infrastructure sector. The acceleration of growth from 6.0% to 8.0% can be made easier if the country learns to draw more productively on foreign savings. Large foreign funded infrastructure projects can have a positive effect on the state of expectations at home and abroad, as demonstrated by China's experience. The surge in FDI in infrastructure in China helped bring in additional foreign private investment in a range of sectors by altering the state of investor expectations.

Policy makers in India must, therefore, acquire a more mature understanding of how expectations are generated and shaped. Policy statements alone matter for little. Thus a 'Vision 2020' or a Five Year Plan that targets 8.0% growth per annum may not be taken very seriously by investors if such statements are not matched by action on the ground and pragmatism in policy making and implementation. Consider the manner in which investors have discounted Prime Minister Vajpayee's growth target of 8.0% for the Tenth Plan period. Based on a hard-headed assessment of actual political capabilities and intentions, most investors place the Tenth Plan growth rate around 6.0%. The optimists may peg it marginally higher and the pessimists a bit lower.

Once investors are convinced that 6.0% is a realistic prospect they will make investment decisions accordingly. I believe most decisions are being made with this average rate of growth in mind for the medium term. To get investors to peg their sights higher, at 7.0% to 8.0%, the government of the day will have to bring the focus of policy attention back to the economy, push through difficult policy reforms, ensure implementation of legislation already passed, and bring in public investment to keep a minimum level of investment going.

The agenda for such reform has been widely written about and practical ideas can be found in a range of essays and government reports, including the last report of the prime minister's Economic Advisory Council. Such action on the ground can alter the state of expectations and accelerate growth. Where there is political will and determination and, more importantly, a modern perception of how the economy works and what drives investment, the right kind of policies will be delivered.

The government must also have a social and political agenda for high growth. The politics of inclusiveness and redistribution is essential to promote the economics of growth in a poor democracy. Social instability and tension, communal and caste divisions, cannot over a period of time contribute to the kind of environment that can foster positive expectations. The economic slowdown in Maharashtra and Gujarat in the 1990s could very well have been due to the kind of politics that these two states came to be identified with through most of the decade. A change in the language of politics is essential to change the pace of economic growth.

**Sanjaya Baru**

## Reserved futures

DESPITE howls of anguish and a plethora of editorials, not many were surprised by the treatment meted out to the Women's Reservation Bill in Parliament. In a depressingly familiar re-play, expected 'villains' sabotaged the introduction of the Bill, created a commotion and forced its deferment to an indefinite future. Even if this sounds cynical, one suspects it came as a welcome relief to all concerned.

Those in the forefront for a legislative reservation for women in state assemblies and Parliament will explain this failure as reflecting a deep seated patriarchal bias and argue how 'irrelevant' issues of a quota within a quota are raised to scuttle what they claim is a progressive and representative initiative. And yet, even within those political formations which claim that women's reservation is a non-negotiable part of their political project, little has been done to advance fresh arguments and win over even a few erstwhile dissidents onto their side.

For instance, years after it was first mooted, no convincing rationale has been advanced about the proposed extent of reservation – 33 per cent. We are still not clear how constituencies will be earmarked, nor about the mode governing rotation of reserved constituencies. Nor, despite considerable experience of political reservation for schedule castes and tribes, are we clear how such interventions impact on political representativeness and accountability. As many have pointed out, rotation of reserved constituencies can contribute to their political neglect, since no incumbent parliamentarian will lavish attention on a constituency he/she is likely to be divested of.

It is also intriguing why the alternative proposal promoting reservation for women by 'forcing' political parties to put up a specified proportion of women candidates, first mooted by the Manushi Trust and subsequently backed by the former CEC, M.S. Gill, has not merited any discussion in Parliament. Surely, the protagonists of this move could have attempted to introduce it as a private member's bill. Or is it that, despite the generally positive experience of reservations for women in panchayats and municipalities, the males of our political class are unwilling to shed any further power?

Equally intriguing is the fact that the recent reservations for 'depressed classes' in the lower judiciary by the Mayawati government in U.P. has not elicited any meaningful engagement, barring the muted reaction that the judiciary should be kept out of the purview



of reservations. Why? Is it that even votaries of reservation feel that introduction of group quotas damages principles of merit and equality? If so, why should the same process be acceptable elsewhere?

More than five decades after we first accepted the principle of reservations/quotas in education, employment and the political sphere, the debate on affirmative action policies, both to correct historical and structural injustice to specified groups as also to increase the representativeness of our public sphere, continues to tread old ground. Possibly one could make a valid case for social engineering from above through creating quotas by legislative fiat. One cannot indefinitely wait for the demand for reform to be created from below.

But as both debate and experience elsewhere, in particular the U.S., so clearly indicates, it is easier to win public approval for forward-looking affirmative action strategies that seek to improve societies in ways that benefit practically everyone rather than advance backward-looking claims to remedy past injustices. Equally, that quota regimes have to be self-limiting if they are not to produce new distortions. Even more, the policy package must move beyond a quota fixation to facilitate fair competition between strata and individuals otherwise placed inequitously.

The case related to race as a criterion for admissions in the University of Michigan, currently being argued before the U.S. Supreme Court, has lessons for us. Among those arguing for a continuation of race-linked affirmative action are the U.S. Army and major corporations on grounds that increased representativeness enhances efficiency. Any similar proposal for our private sector would inevitably generate howls of protest.

It is time we realised that affirmative action policies, including quotas, are essentially a matter of design to win greater social acceptance. Elevating any proposal to a non-negotiable principle only hardens attitudes and creates a stalemate as the turbulence over the Mandal proposals made abundantly clear.

Fortunately, the repeated stalling of the Women's Reservation Bill is now forcing its advocates to rethink their strategies and premises for action as both Shabana Azmi and Jaya Jaitly, two strong votaries from differing political persuasions, recently admitted. Possibly, working for change within political parties may be a preferable route to increasing the presence of women in the political sphere. Otherwise, as before, the battle will be lost before it is joined.

**Harsh Sethi**

## The reek of injustice

LIVING in Jerusalem for the past two and a half years has meant living Israeli fear: the fear of taking children to school and hearing a suicide bomber detonate himself outside the school gates; of not wanting to go to a restaurant or bar or coffee shop for fear of being blown up; of hesitating to call Israeli friends for fear that one of their children had been killed in the latest Palestinian terrorist atrocity.

Living in Jerusalem also means seeing the suffering imposed on three million Palestinians because of these fears. The realities are ugly, difficult to talk about, difficult to believe: the brutality, the injustice, the silencing, the denial, the racism above all, the Occupation.

Most Israelis never go to East Jerusalem; most Palestinians avoid the West. Jerusalem is desperate, beautiful and divided—so clearly divided that you could put up a wall along the seam. Indeed Israel is putting up a wall, but not along the seam. It doesn't so much divide Israelis from Palestinians as Palestinians from each other, and Palestinians from Israeli settlers, grabbing yet more land in the process; all part of the extremists' plan to make any future Palestinian state unworkable by expanding the network of colonies, intersecting roads and industrial developments, leaving the Palestinians living between the mesh, in ghettos.

Unhappy word, ghetto; but there is no other word for the enclosures being built around Palestinian towns. Qalqilya, a once thriving market town of 45,000 people, is now shut off from the world by a fence and wall of concrete 24 feet high. There is one exit, guarded by the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF), who determine whether the occupants, their produce, their food and medicines may or may not pass. The word 'ghetto' comes from mediaeval Venice. It described the walled-off quarter in which Jews were obliged to live: a barbarous, discriminatory policy.

But they were allowed out of the ghetto when they wanted. And even in the worst days of P.W. Botha, the Bantustans were nothing like as restrictive as life in some of the West Bank cities or Gaza—surrounded by a massive barrier, with armed guards at the only entrance that allows through selected foreigners and a handful of Palestinians with special permits. It is hard to describe the pricking alarm you feel when approaching the giant wall and its concrete watchtowers, manned by IDF soldiers who, for whatever reason, sometimes fire in the direction of the children within. I can say this from experi-

\* Reprinted courtesy *The Spectator* and *The Asian Age*.

ence; it happened to my children, who are six and nine, when I took them to the local zoo.

'How irresponsible to take your children to such a place!' I hear the outcry. Blaming the victim is common practice in this conflict. In March, a 23-year-old American student, Rachel Corrie, was crushed to death by an IDF bulldozer. The response: she was 'irresponsible' to have been there in the first place. It was an image reminiscent of another brave demonstrator, this time in Tiananmen Square, facing down a tank, except that the driver managed to go round, not over, him.

Corrie was demonstrating against the demolition of Palestinian homes. Apparently it is the Palestinians' fault when they see their life savings, possessions, memories – their homes – crushed under the military earth-movers. They shouldn't build without a permit. But wait; permits are given to Israelis to build illegal settlements on occupied land, yet not to Palestinians to build on their own land.

Injustice: the place reeks of it. Drive along the apartheid settler roads. Look at the watered settlement lawns and just beyond to the dusty Palestinian towns where water is rationed. Listen to Palestinian joy at a shower of rain, not because it is good for the crops (or the lawn), but because they might be permitted a little more drinking water. Daily, the caged-in Palestinians watch the settlements bloom across the West Bank, riveting the Occupation into what remains of their small share (22 per cent) of Palestine.

The start of the Intifada set the scene: before a single Palestinian shot was fired, the world was shocked to see 'riot control' that consisted not of baton charges and water-cannon, but of shooting dead scores of stone-throwers and bystanders. After that, the massively disproportionate response to Palestinian provocation, and the disregard for justice and international law, became commonplace. Unless it was bizarre, or directed at foreigners such as Ian Hook, a senior British UN official killed in his office by an IDF sniper, it was rarely considered newsworthy.

Almost all studies of violence in the occupied territories have found countless cases of Israelis firing on children, onlookers, old women; of pregnant women dying at IDF checkpoints because they are not allowed through; of hundreds of schools closed, tens of thousands of olive trees uprooted, thousands of houses bulldozed into rubble, entire quarters of historic Palestinian towns razed to the ground.

Earlier this year the Israeli daily *Ha'aretz* reported that the IDF fired internationally banned fléchette shells (designed to explode into thousands of razor-sharp darts)

at a children's soccer field in Gaza while boys were playing. Nine were hit. Israel's Supreme Court has rejected an appeal by Physicians for Human Rights, an Israeli advocacy group, asking the court to ban their use.

Most stories of the daily brutality against Palestinians, unlike those of brutalities against Israelis, are not reported by international witnesses. But some slip through. Chris Hedges of *The New York Times* witnessed an IDF unit in Gaza taunting children over loudspeakers, in Arabic, to come out and throw stones:

'"Come on, dogs. Come! Son of a whore! Your mother's cunt!" whereupon the soldiers shot them with silencers.' Hedges commented that he had seen children shot in several other conflicts, 'but I have never before watched soldiers entice children like mice into a trap and murder them for sport.'

The statistics speak of an Occupation unhindered by international or humanitarian conventions, that keeps thousands in administrative detention, imprisons hundreds of children, and has only recently abolished the official use of torture. B'Tselem, the Israeli human-rights organisation, numbers 102 planned assassinations by the IDF, in which 50 bystanders were also killed. There have been 231 incidents of Palestinian ambulances coming under fire.

There is an unspoken consensus among the international community in Jerusalem, at least among those who have any exposure at all to Palestinians, on two points: the enormity of the injustice, and the difficulty of being able to report it fairly. It is the same with diplomatic cables, published UN reports, news stories and articles: you meet the authors, hear their outrage at what they have seen, and then bemoan the reality that their products are unfailingly censored somewhere along the line (often by themselves in order to avoid the ubiquitous charges of anti-Israel bias by chancelleries, lobbies, editors, proprietors and advertisers).

There is almost universal admiration for the courage of Israelis who speak out: journalists such as Gideon Levy and Amira Hass who report graphically on the horrors of the Occupation; activists such as Jeff Halper, who takes matters into his own hands (literally) by rebuilding demolished Palestinian houses; Israeli groups who try to protect Palestinian farmers from marauding settlers; the refuseniks who decline to be party to the Occupation, risking prison and ostracism in a society built on military service; and the many Israelis who demonstrate, refusing to succumb to the mass denial that holds the majority in its thrall.

Denial makes the continuing brutality and injustice possible; most Israelis are 'unconscious' of what

is being done in their name. It is impossible to believe that any Israelis who visit the Occupied Territories and see the pitiful state of the lives of Palestinians – screwed down under curfew, humiliated at checkpoints, forced, despite their degrees and skills and dreams, into penury and desperation – would not choke in revulsion.

But they are not allowed to go. Nor do they want to. In February, Gershon Baskin described Tel Aviv as teeming with young people enjoying the sunny afternoon, as they should be. 'But just a few miles away hundreds of thousands of people are living under curfew, locked in their homes and towns. Army jeeps parading the streets screaming "Curfew, curfew – get back into your house"; those who refuse the orders are threatened at gunpoint. This is the reality on both sides.'

One has to imagine what this means. Under curfew, you are in prison but have to fend for yourself, forced to remain indoors for up to eight days at a time, a brief release for an hour or two, and then several days curfew again. In the grinding heat of the Middle Eastern summer, a family of 14 people in two rooms, with no running water and no air-conditioning. You run out of baby milk because the Israelis didn't tell you how long the curfew would be, and anyway you have no money as you haven't been allowed to work for months. And if you step out you are shot on sight, and sometimes if you just go near a window you will be shot. If someone is ill, you have no medicine, and have to risk breaking the curfew to get help. And all the time the children scream because they are hungry and bored and beg to be allowed to go to school or just outside.

More than 700 Israelis and 2,000 Palestinians have been killed in this Intifada. That sentence is a problematic one, referring to the deaths of both peoples in the same sentence in order to be even-handed. Israelis call this 'moral equivalence' shocking. Many genuinely feel that to compare the intentional, random and innocent deaths caused by suicide bombings to those carried out by the IDF – always 'with regret', 'in self-defence' or as a 'preventive measure against more terrorism' – is an abomination.

But there is another way to look at moral equivalence: as the violence of a people who have struggled for 36 years to free their land from foreign military rule, as opposed to the violence of a massively strong army fighting to maintain and tighten that rule – in contravention of far more UN Security Council resolutions than Iraq has ever been. One should be 'even-handed', but what is less acceptable is equivalence between the resistance of the occupied and the repression by the illegal occupier.

Even-handed is what most members of the international press sincerely try to be, despite the realms of contrary accusations. There is always talk of suffering on both sides; as if they are somehow equal. Justice apart, and even numbers of casualties apart, one has to look at this suffering. It is true that the Israeli economy has declined by 5 per cent, that Israelis are demoralised, that people feel uneasy going to discotheques and shopping centres. But what about the other side? They don't feel nervous about going to cinemas; they are forcibly prevented from going anywhere at all. Their economy has not declined; it no longer exists.

Israelis justify all their actions on the basis of 'security', which cannot be compared with Palestinian 'terror'. For a country whose intelligentsia has more of a conscience than any other in the world, how can so many be so unreflective when it comes to the Palestinians, especially given the security and economic millstone that the settlements represent for Israel?

It doesn't get more racist than this: critics silenced because of the ethnicities involved. I will be accused of racism – racism against the occupiers. There will be letters that accuse me of anti-Semitism; of not acknowledging that this is all in self-defence; that the occupiers don't like doing this to their victims; that it's the Palestinians who 'make' them do it.

After two and a half years of watching the realities of this conflict, travelling and working in the Occupied Territories, getting to know many Israelis and Palestinians, I am left with a sense of the tragic waste of two peoples, their lives and their futures. Of course the Palestinians are guilty of atrocity and injustice, of silencing and racism. There is a brutalised, sometimes brutal society. Many feel they have nothing to lose but their lives, and are ready to commit despicable acts in the process.

On the other side, a majority of Israelis feel they have no choice but to trust a government that has brought them nothing but more insecurity and economic difficulty, which appears to have little intention of ending the Occupation, and some of whose members openly advocate ethnic cleansing.

Talk of international 'road-maps' out of the conflict are to be welcomed, but when the political map proposing reason, hope and peaceful co-existence bears no resemblance to the geographical map, whose reality is an ever-expanding colonisation of steel, concrete and extremist ideology, which map is likely to prevail? And at what cost to Israel's future?

Emma Williams

# Backpage

A RECENT plea by leading activists of the National Campaign for the People's Right to Information about the contradictory trends in our struggle for accountability and transparency makes for depressing reading. To briefly recap, the national campaign traces its genesis to a two decade old struggle by the MKSS, a movement of poor, rural landless labourers and farmers in Rajasthan for access to the muster rolls in famine relief and employment works to nail the official lie regarding payment of minimum wages.

Subsequently, the movement expanded to cover the development works by panchayats through the innovative strategy of *jan sunwayis*. This movement elicited wide support, both from those directly affected by corruption in official works as also a wide spectrum of civil society, even affecting the electoral fortunes of many seeking panchayat and zilla parishad offices. Many states were finally forced to legislate a Right to Information Bill and appropriate all India legislation is awaiting central approval.

The 'success' of many local struggles around transparency and accountability emboldened civic associations and movements to access and use 'official data' to put pressure on public agencies—be it in the struggles over the dams on the Narmada or in exposing official complicity in the recent Gujarat carnage, among others, even managing some progress in forcing all those seeking electoral office to share prior details about their economic assets and criminal record.

Not unexpectedly, none of this has been easy. Not only have different governments (both at the centre and states) tried hard to bring in 'flawed' legislations leaving wide spaces for official discretion about what to share and how, recent years have also witnessed a range of restrictive legislations to control dissent, the anti-terrorist POTA being a case in point. Simultaneously, additional curbs have been placed on the functioning of NGOs, academic bodies and independent institutions.

Most distressing, however, has been a systematic and pernicious disinformation and campaign of calumny targeting leading voices of dissent. Be it Tarun Tejpal and his associates in Tehelka, Arundhati Roy being pulled up for contempt of court, Sandeep Pandey charged with fomenting communal discord, or Harsh Mander accused of being anti-Hindu. The list can easily be expanded.

Most recently, historian Romila Thapar (incidentally one of the trustees of *Seminar*) has been subjected

to a vicious hate campaign on being awarded the first Kluge Chair in Countries and Cultures of the South at the US Library of Congress. Thapar has of late been a target of communal and fundamentalist forces for her books which advance a 'secular' reading of India's past. Disagreement with her academic/historical work is fine; alternative readings of history are always welcome and need encouragement. Calling names and questioning personal integrity in an unseemly manner reminiscent of McCarthyist witch-hunts is something else. Rarely do these ideological warriors (and their political masters) realise the damage they are inflicting on our fragile institutional structures and processes in demanding that only one view prevail.

The issue, however, is somewhat more serious than which side we choose in the current ideological divide. Nor can we get away by arguing that all we are doing now is what was done to us in the past when the 'other' side was in power—a popular formulation when discussing history texts and institutions. True, that many of the erstwhile socialist regimes or dictatorships indulged in systematic witch-hunts. For us, the challenge lies in understanding how even liberal democracies which uphold freedom of expression enforce conformism and discipline dissent—claiming recourse to a national good or correcting past historical wrongs.

Irresponsible name calling is no longer the prerogative of one set of individuals, institutions or ideological camps. Even NGOs and social movements associated with progressive causes are often overly reticent in sharing details about themselves, in particular funding sources and organisational linkages. So far, only one national NGO, the SWRC Tilonia has held a *jan sunwayi* on itself.

The choice between competing claims in a climate characterized by intense competition over public legitimacy, more so when those being asked to judge may lack both information and expertise, cannot but be contentious. But surely, there is little need to cross the bounds of civility and instead work towards instilling common norms of interrogation. Why not subject oneself to the same rules and processes that we demand of the other. Then might we have dissent that contributes to diversity and pluralism, preconditions for freedom, and not chaos and calumny.

**Harsh Sethi**

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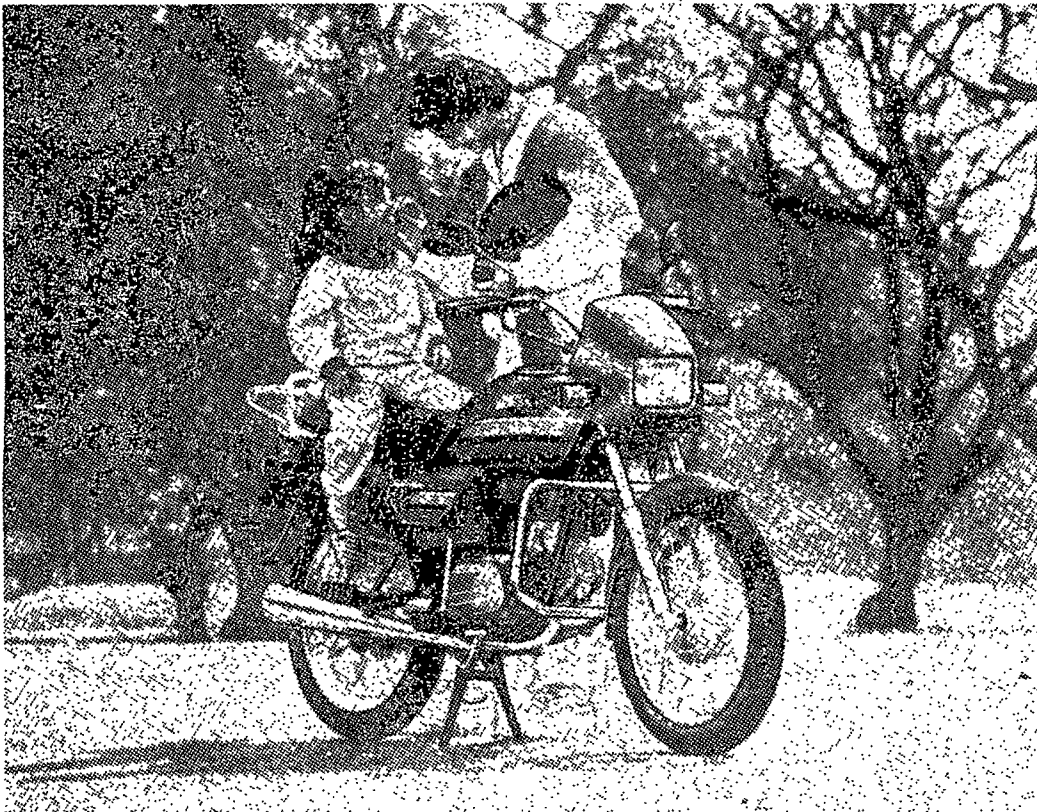
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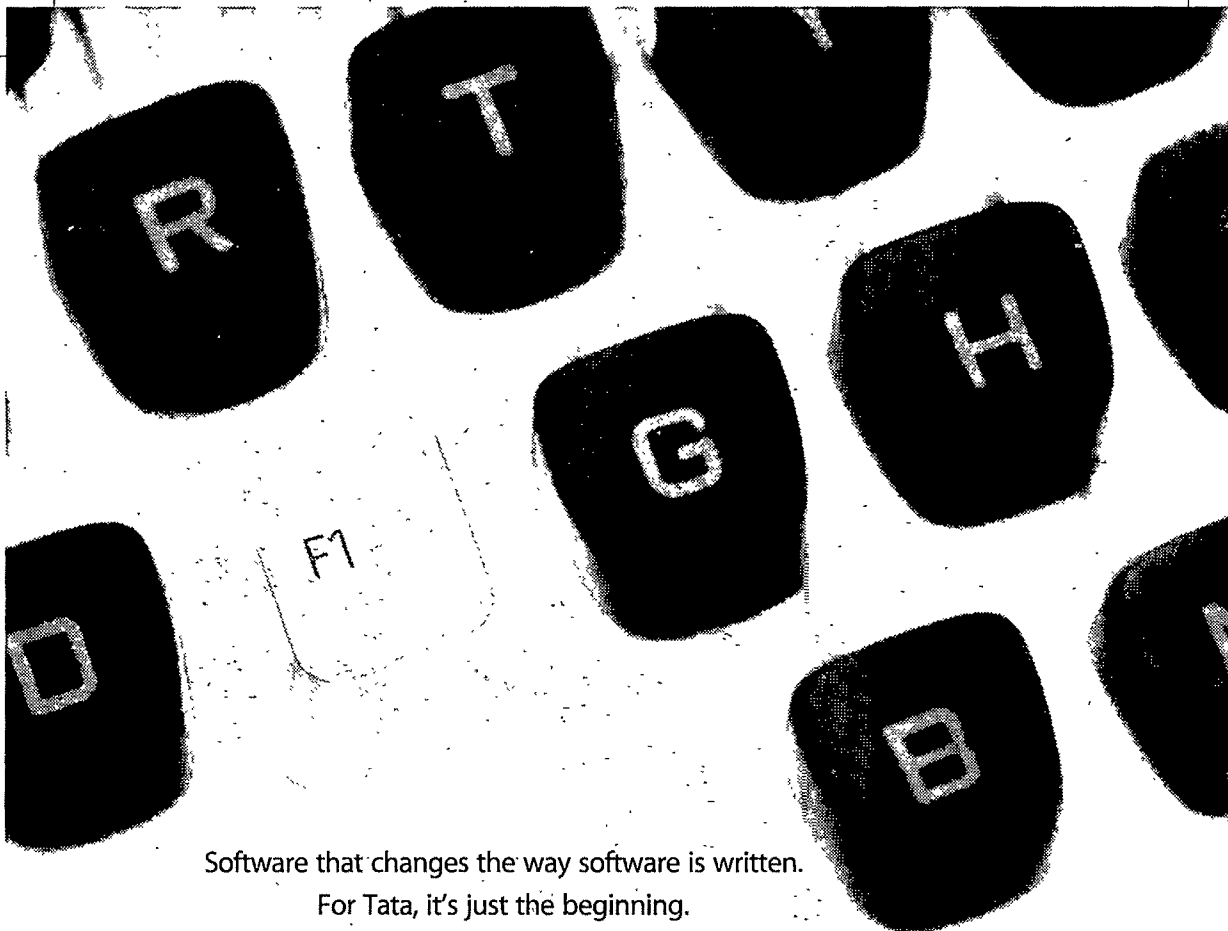
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Printed and Published by Malvika Singh on behalf of the Romeshraj Trust from Malhotra Building, Janpath,  
New Delhi and Printed by her at Kapidhvaj Printers, 639, Bawli Street, Pahar Ganj, New Delhi-110055